THE POSTMASTER

Joseph C. Lincoln

"Seems to me I never saw her look prettier."

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THE POSTMASTER

BY JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

Author of "The Depot Master," "Cap'n Warrens Wards," "Cap'n Eri," "Mr. Pratt," etc.

With Four Illustrations
By HOWARD HEATH

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THE POSTMASTER

CHAPTER I

I MAKE TWO BETS — AND LOSE ONE OF 'EM

SO you're through with the sea for good, are you, Cap'n Zeb," says Mr. Pike.

"You bet!" says I. "Through for good is just *what* I am."

"Well, I'm sorry, for the firm's sake," he says. "It won't seem natural for the *Fair Breeze* to make port without you in command. Cap'n, you're goin' to miss the old schooner."

"Cal'late I shall — some — along at fust," I told him. "But I'll get over it, same as the cat got over missin' the canary bird's singin'; and I'll have the cat's consolation — that I done what seemed best for me."

He laughed. He and I were good friends, even though he was ship-owner and I was only skipper, just retired.

"So you're goin' back to Ostable?" he says. "What are you goin' to do after you get there?"

"Nothin'; thank you very much," says I, prompt.

"No work at *all?*" he says, surprised. "Not a hand's turn? Goin' to be a gentleman of leisure, hey?"

"Nigh as I can, with my trainin'. The 'leisure' part'll be all right, anyway."

He shook his head and laughed again.

"I think I see you," says he. "Cap'n, you've been too busy all your life even to get married, and—"

"Humph!" I cut in. "Most married men I've met have been a good-deal busier than ever I was. And a good deal more worried when business was dull. No, sir-ee! 'twa'n't that that kept me from gettin' married. I've been figgerin' on the day when I could go home and settle down. If I'd had a wife all these years I'd have been figgerin' on bein' able to settle up. I ain't goin' to Ostable to get married."

"I'll bet you do, just the same," says he. "And I'll bet you somethin' else: I'll bet a new hat, the best one I can buy, that inside of a year you'll be head over heels in some sort of hard work. It may not be seafarin', but it'll be somethin' to keep you busy. You're too good a man to rust in the scrap heap. Come! I'll bet the hat. What do you say?"

"Take you," says I, quick. "And if you want to risk another on my marryin', I'll take that, too."

"Go you," says he. "You'll be married inside of three years — or five, anyway."

"One year that I'll be at work — steady work — and five that I'm married. You're shipped, both ways. And I wear a seven and a quarter, soft hat, black preferred."

"If I don't win the first bet I will the second, sure," he says, confident. "'Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands,' you know. Well, good-by, and good luck. Come in and see us whenever you get to New York."

We shook hands, and I walked out of that office, the office that had been my home port ever since I graduated from fust mate to skipper. And on the way to the Fall River boat I vowed my vow over and over again.

"Zebulon Snow," I says to myself — not out loud, you understand; for, accordin' to Scriptur' or the Old Farmers' Almanac or somethin', a feller who talks to himself is either rich or crazy and, though I was well enough fixed to keep the wolf from the door, I wa'n't by no means so crazy as to leave the door open and take chances — "Zebulon Snow," says I, "you're forty-eight year old and blessedly single. All your life you've been haulin' ropes, or bossin' fo'mast hands, or tryin' to make harbor in a fog. Now that you've got an anchor to wind'ard — now that the one talent you put un-

der the stock exchange napkin has spread out so that you have to have a tablecloth to tote it home in, don't you be a fool. Don't plant it again, cal'-latin' to fill a mains'l next time, 'cause you won't do it. Take what you've got and be thankful — and careful. You go ashore at Ostable, where you was born, and settle down and be somebody."

That's about what I said to myself, and that's what I started to do. I made Ostable on the next mornin's train. The town had changed a whole lot since I left it, mainly on account of so many summer folks buyin' and buildin' everywhere, especially along the water front. The few reg'lar inhabitants that I knew seemed to be glad to see me, which I took as a sort of compliment, for it don't always foller by a consider'ble sight. I got into the depot wagon — the same horse was drawin' it, I judged, that Eben Hendricks had bought when I was a boy — and asked to be carted to the Travelers' Inn. It appeared that there wa'n't any Travelers' Inn now, that is to say, the name of it had been changed to the Poquit House; "Poquit" bein' Injun or Portygee or somethin' foreign.

But the name was the only thing about that hotel that was changed. The grub was the same and the wallpaper on the rooms they showed to me looked about the same age as I was, and wa'n't enough handsomer to count, either. I hired a couple of

them rooms, one to sleep in and smoke in, and t'other to entertain the parson in, if he should call, which — unless the profession had changed, too — I judged he would do pretty quick. I had the rooms cleaned and papered, bought some dyspepsy medicine to offset the meals I was likely to have, and settled down to be what Mr. Pike had called a "gentleman of leisure."

Fust three months 'twas fine. At the end of the second three it commenced to get a little mite dull. In about two more I found my mind was shrinkin' so that the little mean cat-talks at the breakfast table was beginnin' to seem interestin' and important. Then I knew 'twas time to doctor up with somethin' besides dyspepsy pills. Ossification was settin' in and I'd got to do somethin' to keep me interested, even if I paid for Pike's hats for the next generation.

You see, there was such a sameness to the programme. Turn out in the mornin', eat and listen to gossip, go out and take a walk, smoke, talk with folks I met — more gossip — come back and eat again, go over and watch the carpenters on the latest summer cottage, smoke some more, eat some more, and then go down to the Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store, or to the post-office, and set around with the gang till bedtime. That may be an excitin' life for

a jellyfish, or a reg'lar Ostable loafer — but it didn't suit me.

I was feelin' that way, and pretty desperate, the night when Winthrop Adams Beanblossom — which wa'n't the critter's name but is nigh enough to the real one for him to cruise under in this yarn — told me the story of his life and started me on the v'yage that come to mean so much to me. I didn't know 'twas goin' to mean much of anything when I started in. But that night Winthrop got me to paddlin', so's to speak, and, later on, come Jim Henry Jacobs to coax me into deeper water; and, after that, the combination of them two and Miss Letitia Lee Pendlebury shoved me in all under, so 'twas a case of stickin' to it or swimmin' or drownin'.

I was in the Ostable Store that evenin', as usual. 'Twas almost nine o'clock and the rest of the bunch around the stove had gone home. I was fillin' my pipe and cal'latin' to go, too — if you can call a tavern like the Poquit House a home. Beanblossom was in behind the desk, his funny little grizzly-gray head down over a pile of account books and papers, his specs roostin' on the end of his thin nose, and his pen scratchin' away like a stray hen in a flower bed.

"Well, Beanblossom," says I, gettin' up and stretchin', "I cal'late it's time to shed the partin' tear. I'll leave you to figger out whether to spend

this week's profits in government bonds or trips to Europe and go and lay my weary bones in the tomb, meanin' my private vault on the second floor of the Poquit. Adieu, Beanblossom," I says; "remember me at my best, won't you?"

He didn't seem to sense what I was drivin' at. He lifted his head out of the books and papers, heaved a sigh that must have started somewheres down along his keelson, and says, sorrowful but polite — he was always polite —"Er — yes? You were addressin' me, Cap'n Snow?"

"Nothin' in particular," I says. "I was just askin' if you intended spendin' your profits on a trip to Europe this summer."

Would you believe it, that little store-keepin' man looked at me through his specs, his pale face twitchin' and workin' like a youngster's when he's tryin' not to cry, and then, all to once, he broke right down, leaned his head on his hands and sobbed out loud.

I looked at him. "For the dear land sakes," I sung out, soon's I could collect sense enough to say anything, "what is the matter? Is anybody dead or —"

He groaned. "Dead?" he interrupted. "I wish to heaven, *I* was dead."

"Well!" I gasps. *"Well!"*

"Oh, why," says he, "was I ever born?"

That bein' a question that I didn't feel competent to answer, I didn't try. My remark about goin' to Europe was intended for a joke, but if my jokes made grown-up folks cry I cal'lated 'twas time I turned serious.

"What *is* the matter, Beanblossom?" I says. "Are you in trouble?"

For a spell he wouldn't answer, just kept on sobbin' and wringin' his thin hands, but, after consider'ble of such, and a good many unsatisfyin' remarks, he give in and told me the whole yarn, told me all his troubles. They were complicated and various.

Picked over and b'iled down they amounted to this: He used to have an income and he lived on it — in bachelor quarters up to Boston. Nigh as I could gather he never did any real work except to putter in libraries and collect books and such. Then, somehow or other, the bank the heft of his money was in broke up and his health broke down. The doctors said he must go away into the country. He couldn't afford to go and do nothin', so he has a wonderful inspiration — he'll buy a little store in what he called a "rural community" and go into business. He advertises, "Country Store Wanted Cheap," or words to that effect. Abial Beasley's widow had the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store" on her hands.

She answers the ad and they make a dicker. Said dicker took about all the cash Beanblossom had left. For a year he had been fightin' along tryin' to make both ends meet, but now they was so fur apart they was likely to meet on the back stretch. He owed 'most a thousand dollars, his trade was fallin' off, he hadn't a cent and nobody to turn to. What should he do? *What* should he do?

That was another question I couldn't answer off hand. It was plain enough why he was in the hole he was, but how to get him out was different. I set down on the edge of the counter, swung my legs and tried to think.

"Hum," says I, "you don't know much about keepin' store, do you, Beanblossom? Didn't know nothin' about it when you started in?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Cap'n Snow," he says. "Why should I? I never was obliged to labor. I was not interested in trade. I never supposed I should be brought to this. I am a man of family, Cap'n Snow."

"Yes," I says, "so'm I. Number eight in a family of thirteen. But that never helped me none. My experience is that you can't count much on your relations."

Would I pardon him, but that was not the sense in which he had used the word "family." He meant that he came of the best blood in New Eng-

land. His ancestors had made their marks and —

"Made their marks!" I put in. "Why? Couldn't they write their names?"

He was dreadful shocked, but he explained. The Beanblossoms and their gang were big-bugs, fine folks. He was terrible proud of his family. During the latter part of his life in Boston he had become interested in genealogy. He had begun a "family tree"— whatever that was — but he never finished it. The smash came and shook him out of the branches; that wa'n't what he said, but 'twas the way. I sensed it. And now he had come to this. His money was gone; he couldn't pay his debts; he couldn't have any more credit. He must fail; he was bankrupt. Oh, the disgrace! and likewise oh, the poorhouse!

"But," says I, considerin', "it can't be so turrible bad. You don't owe but a thousand dollars, this store's the only one in town and Abial used to do pretty well with it. If your debts was paid, and you had a little cash to stock up with, seems to me you might make a decent v'yage yet. Couldn't you?"

He didn't know. Perhaps he could. But what was the use of talkin' that way? For him to pick up a thousand would be about as easy as for a paralyzed man with boxin' gloves on to pick up a flea, or words to that effect. No, no, 'twas no use! he

must go to the poorhouse! and so forth and so on.

"You hold on," I says. "Don't you engage your poorhouse berth yet. You keep mum and say nothin' to nobody and let me think this over a spell. I need somethin' to keep me interested and . . . I'll see you to-morrow sometime. Good night."

I went home thinkin' and I thought till pretty nigh one o'clock. Then I decided I was a fool even to think for five minutes. Hadn't I sworn to be careful and never take another risk? I was sorry for poor old Winthrop, but I couldn't afford to mix pity and good legal tender; that was the sort of blue and yeller drink that filled the poor-debtors' courts. And, besides, wasn't I pridin' myself on bein' a gentleman of leisure. If I got mixed up in this, no tellin' what I might be led into. Hadn't I bragged to Pike about — Oh, I *was* a fool!

Which was all right, only, after listenin' to the breakfast conversation at the Poquit House, down I goes to the store and afore the forenoon was over I was Winthrop Adams Beanblossom's silent partner to the extent of twenty-five hundred dollars. I was busy once more and glad of it, even though Pike *was* goin' to get a hat free.

This was in January. By early March I was twice as busy and not half as glad. You see I'd cal'lated that the store was all right, all it needed

was financin'. Trade was just asleep, taking a nap, and I could wake it up. I was wrong. Trade was dead, and, barrin' the comin' of a prophet or some miracle worker to fetch it to life, what that shop was really sufferin' for was an undertaker. My twenty-five hundred was funeral expenses, that's all.

But the prophet came. Yes, sir, he came and fetched his miracle with him. One evenin', after all the reg'lar customers, who set around in chairs borrowin' our genuine tobacco and payin' for it with counterfeit funny stories, had gone — after everybody, as we cal'lated, had cleared out — Beanblossom and I set down to hold our usual autopsy over the remains of the fortni't's trade. 'Twas a small corpse and didn't take long to dissect. We'd lost twenty-one dollars and sixty-eight cents, and the only comfort in that was that 'twas seventy-six cents less than the two weeks previous. The weather had been some cooler and less stuff had sp'iled on our hands; that accounted for the savin'.

Beanblossom — I'd got into the habit of callin' him "Pullet" 'cause his general build was so similar to a moultin' chicken — he vowed he couldn't understand it.

"I think I shall give up buyin' so liberally, Cap'n Snow," says he. "If we didn't keep on buyin' we shouldn't lose half so much," he says.

"Yes," says I, "that's logic. And if we give up

sellin' we shouldn't lose the other half. You and me are all right as fur as we go, Pullet, and I guess we've gone about as fur as we can."

"Please don't call me 'Pullet,'" he says, dignified. "When I think of what I once was, it —"

"S-sh-h!" I broke in. "It's what I am that troubles me. I don't dare think of that when the minister's around — he might be a mind-reader. No, Pul — Beanblossom, I mean — it's no use. I imagined because I could run a three-masted schooner I could navigate this craft. I can't. I know twice as much as you do about keepin' store, but the trouble with that example is the answer, which is that you don't know nothin'. We might just exactly as well shut up shop now, while there's enough left to square the outstandin' debts."

He turned white and began the hand-wringin' exercise.

"Think of the disgrace!" he says.

"Think of my twenty-five hundred," says I.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," says a voice astern of us; "excuse me for buttin' in; but I judge that what you need is a butter."

Pullet and I jumped and turned round. We'd supposed we was alone and to say we was surprised is puttin' it mild. For a second I couldn't make out what had happened, or where the voice came from, or who 'twas that had spoke — then, as he come

across into the lamplight I recognized him. 'Twas Jim Henry Jacobs, the livin' mystery.

Jim Henry was middlin'-sized, sharp-faced, dressed like a ready-tailored advertisement, and as smooth and slick as an eel in a barrel of sweet ile. Accordin' to his entry on the books of the Poquit House he hailed from Chicago. He'd been in Ostable for pretty nigh a month and nobody had been able to find out any more about him than just that, which is a some miracle of itself — if you know Ostable. He was always ready to talk — talkin' was one of his main holts — but when you got through talkin' with him all you had to remember was a smile and a flow of words. He was at the seashore for his health, that he always give you to understand. You could believe it if you wanted to.

He'd got into the habit of spendin' his evenin's at Pullet's store, settin' around listenin' and smilin' and agreein' with folks. He was the only feller I ever met who could say no and agree with you at the same time. Solon Saunders tried to borrow fifty cents of him once and when the pair of 'em parted, Saunders was scratchin' his head and lookin' puzzled. "I can't understand it," says Solon. "I would have swore he'd lent it to me. 'Twas just as if I had the fifty in my hand. I — I thanked him for it and all that, but — but now he's gone I

don't seem to be no richer than when I started. I can't understand it."

Pullet and I had seen him settin' abaft the stove early in the evenin', but, somehow or other, we got the notion that he'd cleared out with the other loafers. However, he hadn't, and he'd heard all we'd been sayin'.

He walked across to where we was, pulled a shoe box from under the counter, come to anchor on it and crossed his legs.

"Gentlemen," he says again, "you need a butter."

Poor old Pullet was so set back his brains was sort of scrambled, like a pan of eggs.

"Er-er, Mr. Jacobs," he says, "I am very sorry, extremely sorry, but we are all out just at this minute. I fully intended to order some to-day, but I — I guess I must have forgotten it."

Jacobs couldn't seem to make any more out of this than I did.

"Out?" he says, wonderin'. "Out? Who's out? What's out? I guess I've dropped the key or lost the combination. What's the answer?"

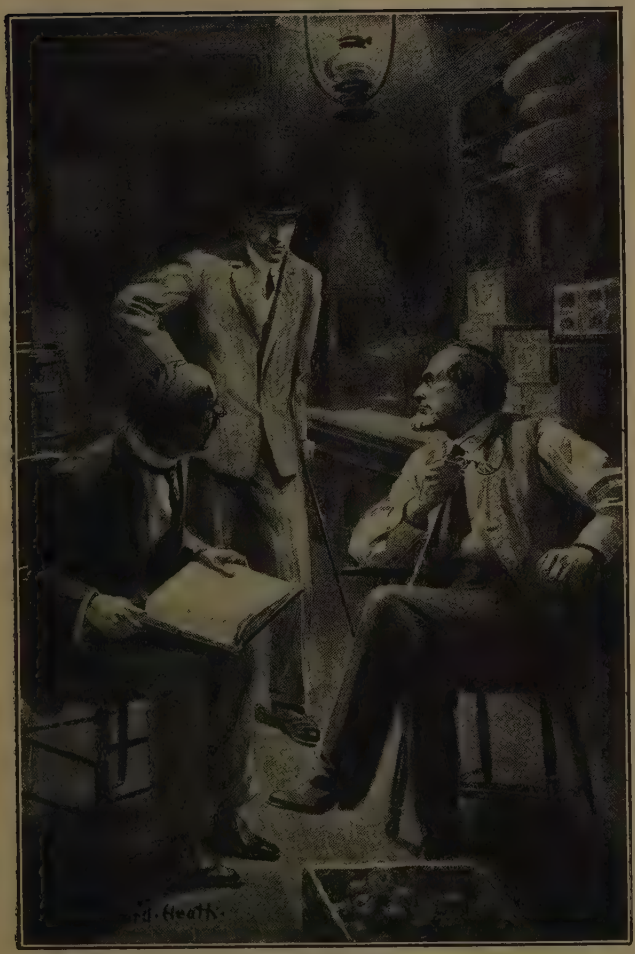
"Why, butter," says Pullet, apologizin'. "You asked for butter, didn't you? As I was sayin', I should have ordered some to-day, but —"

Jim Henry waved his hands. "Sh-h," he says, "don't mention it. Forget it. If I'd wanted but-

ter in this emporium I should have asked for somethin' else. I've been givin' this mart of trade some attention for the past three weeks and I judge that its specialty is bein' able to supply what ain't wanted. I hinted that you two needed a butter-in. All right. I'm the goat. Now if you'll kindly give me your attention, I'll elucidate."

We give the attention. After he'd "elucidated" for five minutes we'd have given him our clothes. You never heard such a mess of language as that Chicago man turned loose. He talked and talked and talked. He knew all about the store and the business, and what he didn't know he guessed and guessed right. He knew about Pullet and his buyin' the place, about my goin' in as silent partner — though *that* nobody was supposed to know. He knew the shebang wa'n't payin' and, also and moreover, he knew why. And he had the remedy buttoned up in his jacket — the name of it was James Henry Jacobs.

"Gentlemen," he says, "I'm a specialist. I'm a doctor of sick business. Ever since my medicine man ordered me to quit the giddy metropolis and the Grand Central Department Store, where I was third assistant manager, I've been driftin' about seekin' a nice, quiet hamlet and an opportunity. Here's the ham and, if you say the word, here's the opportunity. This shop is in a decline; it's got



"As he come across into the lamplight I recognized him."

creepin' paralysis and locomotive hang-back-tia. There's only one thing that can change the funeral to a silver weddin'— that's to call in Old Doctor Jacobs. Here he is, with his pocket full of testimonials. Now you listen."

We'd been listenin'—'twas by long odds the easiest thing to do — and we kept right on. He had testimonials — he showed 'em to us — and they took oath to his bein' honest and the eighth business wonder of the world. He went on to elaborate. He had a thousand to invest and he'd invest it provided we'd take him in as manager and give him full swing. He'd guarantee — etcetery and so on, unlimited and eternal.

"But," says I, when he stopped to eat a throat lozenge, "sellin' goods is one thing; gettin' the right goods to sell is another. Me and Pullet — Mr. Beanblossom here — have tried to keep a pretty fair-sized stock, but it's the kind of stock that keeps better'n it sells."

"Sell!" he puts in. "You can sell anything, if you know how. See here, let me prove it to you. You think this over to-night and to-morrow forenoon I'll be on hand and demonstrate. Just put on your smoked glasses and watch me. *I'll* show you."

He did. Next mornin' old Aunt Sarah Oliver came in to buy a hank of black yarn to darn stockin's with. With diplomacy and patience the aver-

age feller could conclude that dicker in an hour and a quarter — if he had the yarn. Pullet was just out of black, of course, but that Jim Henry Jacobs stepped alongside and within twenty minutes he sold Aunt Sarah two packages of needles, a brass thimble and a half dozen pair of blue and yellow striped stockin's that had been on the shelves since Abial Beasley's time, and was so loud that a sane person wouldn't dare wear 'em except when it thundered. She went out of the store with her bundles in one hand and holdin' her head with the other. Then that Jim Henry man turned to Pullet and me.

"Well?" he says, serene and smilin'.

It was well, all right. At just quarter to twelve that night the arrangements was made. Jacobs was partner in and manager of the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store."

CHAPTER II

WHAT A "PULLET" DID TO A PEDIGREE

IN less than two months that store of ours was a payin' proposition. Jim Henry Jacobs was responsible, that is all I can tell you. Don't ask me how he did it. 'Twas advertisin', mainly. Advertisin' in the papers, advertisin' on the fences, things set out in the windows, a new gaudy delivery cart, special bargain days for special stuff — they all helped. Of course if we'd limited ourselves to Ostable the cargo wouldn't have been so heavy that we'd get stoop-shouldered, but that Jim Henry was unlimited. He advertised in the county weekly and sent a special cart to take orders for twenty mile around. The early summer cottages was beginnin' to open and 'twas summer trade, rich city folks' trade, that the Jacobs man said we must have. And we got it, one way or another we got it all. Most of the swell big-bugs had been in the habit of orderin' wholesale from Boston, but he soon stopped that. One after another Jim Henry landed 'em. When I asked him how, he just winked.

"Skipper," says he — he most generally called me "Skipper" same as I called Beanblossom "Pullet"—"Skipper," he says, "you can always hook a cod if there's any around and you keepin' changin' bait; ain't that so? Um-hm; well, I change bait, that's all. Every man, woman and suffragette has got a weak p'int somewheres. I just cast around till I find that particular weak p'int; then they swaller hook, line and sinker."

"Humph!" I says, "Miss Letitia ain't swallowed nothin' yet, that I've noticed. Her weak p'ints all strong ones? or what is the matter?"

He made a face. "Sister Pendlebury," says he, "is the frostiest proposition I ever tackled outside of an ice chest. But I'll get her yet. You wait and see. Why, man, we've *got* to get her."

Well, I could find more truth in them statements than I could satisfaction. We'd got to get her — yes. But she wouldn't be got. She was the richest old maid on the North Shore; lived in a stone and plaster house bigger'n the Ostable County jail, which she'd labeled "Pendlebury Villa"; had six servants, three cats and a poll parrot; and was so tipped back with dignity and importance that a plumb-line dropped from her after-hair comb would have missed her heels by three inches. Her winter port was Brookline; summers she condescended to shed glory over Ostable.

To get the trade of Pendlebury Villa had been Jim Henry's dream from the start. And up to date he was still dreamin'. The other big-bugs he had caged, but Letitia was still flyin' free and importin' her honey from Boston, so to speak. Jacobs had tried everything he could think of, bribin' the servants, sendin' samples of fancy breakfast food and pickles free gratis, writin' letters, callin' with his Sunday clothes on, everything — but 'twas "Keep Off the Grass" at Pendlebury Villa so far as we was concerned. 'Twas the biggest chunk of trade under one head on the Cape and it hurt Jim Henry's pride not to get it. However, he kept on tryin'.

One mornin' he comes back to the store after a cruise to the Villa and it seemed to me that he looked happier than was usual after one of these trips.

"Skipper," says he, "I think — I wouldn't bet any more'n my small change, but I *think* I've laid a corner stone."

"With Miss Pendlebury?" says I, excited.

"With Letitia," he says, noddin'. "I haven't got an order, but I have got a promise. She's agreed to drop in one of these days and look us over."

"Well!" says I, "I should say that *was* a corner stone."

"We'll hope 'tis," he says. "Ho, ho! Skipper,

I wish you might have been present at the exercises. They were funny."

Seems he'd managed — bribery and corruption of the hired help again — to see Letitia alone in what she called her "mornin' room." He said that, if he'd paid any attention to the temperature of that room when he and she first met in it, he'd have figgered he'd struck the morgue; but he warmed it up a little afore he left. Miss Pendlebury just set and glared frosty while he talked and talked and talked. She said about three words to his two hundred thousand, but every one of hers was a "no." She didn't care to patronize the local merchants. The city ones were bad enough — she had all the trouble she wanted with *them*. She was not interested; and would he please be careful when he went out and not step on the flower beds.

He was about ready to give it up when he happened to notice an ile portrait in a gorgeous gold frame hangin' on the wall. 'Twas the picture of a man, and Jim Henry said there was a kind of great-I-am look to it, a combination of fatness and importance and wisdom, same as you see in a stuffed owl, that give him an idea. He started to go, stopped in front of the picture and began to look it over, admirin' but reverent, same as a garter snake might look at a boa-constrictor, as proof of what the race was capable of.

"Excuse me, Miss Pendlebury," he says, "but that is a wonderful portrait. I have had some experience in judgin' paintin's —" he was clerk in the Grand Central Store framed picture department once —" and I think I know what I'm talkin' about."

Would you believe it, she commenced to unbend right off.

"It is a Sargent," says she.

Now *I* should have asked: "Sergeant of militia, or what?" and upset the whole calabash; but Jim Henry knew better. He bows, solemn and wise, and says he'd been sure of it right along.

"But any painter," he says, "would have made a success with a subject like that gentleman before him. There is somethin' about him, the height of his brow, and his wonderful eyes, etcetery, which reminds me — You'll excuse me, Miss Pendlebury, but isn't that a portrait of one of your near relatives?"

She unbent some more and almost smiled. The painted critter was her pa and he was considered a wonderful likeness.

Well, that was enough for your uncle Jim Henry. He settled down to his job then and the way he poured gush over that painted Pendlebury man was close to sacreligion. But Letitia never pumped up a blush; worship was what she expected for her and her pa. He'd been a member of the Gov-

ernor's staff and a bank president and a church warden and an alderman and land knows what. His daughter and Jacobs had a real sociable interview and it ended by her promisin' to drop in at the store and look our stock over. 'Course 'twa'n't likely 'twould suit her — she was very exacting, she said — but she'd look it over.

We looked it over fust. We put in the rest of that day changin' everything around on the counters and shelves, puttin' the canned stuff in piles where they'd do the most good, and settin' advertisin' signs and such in front of the empty places where they'd been afore. Even Pullet worked, though he couldn't understand it, and growled because he had to leave the musty old book he was readin' and the "genealogical tree" he'd begun to cultivate once more. Jacobs was pretty well disgusted with Pullet. Said he was an incumbrance on the concern and hadn't any business instinct.

All the next day and the next we hung around, dressed up to kill — that is, Jim Henry's togs would have killed anything with weak eyes — waitin' for Letitia Pendlebury to come aboard and inspect. But she didn't come that day, or the next either. Jacobs was disapp'inted, but he wouldn't give in that he was discouraged. The fourth forenoon, when there was still nothin' doin', he and I went on a cruise with a hired horse and buggy over to

Bayport, where we had some business. We left Pullet in charge of the store and when we came back he was lookin' pretty joyful.

"Who do you think has been here?" he says, in his thin, polite little voice. "Miss Letitia Pendlebury called this afternoon."

"She did!" shouts Jacobs.

"Did she buy anythin'?" I wanted to know.

No, it appeared that she hadn't bought anythin'. Fact is, Pullet had forgot he was supposed to be a storekeeper. When Letitia came in he was roostin' in his family tree, had the chart spread out on the counter and was fillin' in some of the twigs with the names of dead and gone Beanblossoms. He couldn't climb down to common things like crackers and salt pork.

"But she was very much interested," he says, his specs shinin' with joy. "When she found out what I was busy with she was *very* much interested, really. She is a lady of family, too."

"She *is?*" I sings out. "What are you talkin' about? She's an old maid and an only child besides, and —"

"Hush up, Skipper," orders Jacobs. "Go on, Pullet — Mr. Beanblossom, I mean — go on."

So on went Pullet, both wings flappin'. Letitia and he had talked "family" to beat the cars. She had 'most everything in the Villa except a family

tree. She must have one right away. She simply must.

"And I am to help her in preparin' it," says Pullet, puffed up and vainglorious. "The Pendlebury family tree will be an honor to prepare. Of course it will require much labor and research, but I shall enjoy doing it. I told her so. Her father would have prepared one himself, had often spoken of it, but he was a very busy man of affairs and lacked the time."

My, but I was mad! I cal'late if I had a marlinspike handy our coop would have been a Pullet short. But Jim Henry Jacobs was so full of tickle he couldn't keep still. He fairly dragged me into the back room.

"Skipper," he says, "here it is at last! We've got it!"

"Yes," I sputters, thinkin' he was referrin' to Beanblossom, "we've got it; and, if you ask me, I'd tell you we'd ought to chloroform it afore it does any more harm."

"No, no," he says, "you don't understand. We've got the old girl's weak p'int at last. It's genealogy. Pullet shall grow her a family tree if I have to buy a carload of fertilizer to-morrer. Think of it! think of it! Why, she won't give him a minute's rest from now on. She'll be after him the whole time."

"But I can't see where the trade comes in," says I.

"You *can't!* With our senior pardner head forester? My boy, if any other shop sells Pendlebury Villa a dollar's worth after this, I'll Fletcherize my hat, that's all!"

He knew what he was talkin' about, as usual. The very next forenoon Letitia was in to consult with Pullet about huntin' up her family records. Afore she left Jacobs took orders for thirty-two dollars' worth and I'd have bet she didn't know a thing she bought. After dinner, Jim Henry sent Pullet up to see her. He stayed until supper time. Next day he had supper at the Villa. A week later he made his first trip to Boston, to the Genealogical Society, to hunt for records. And Jacobs stayed in Ostable and kept the Villa supplied with the luxuries of life. If the Pendlebury servants didn't die of gout and overeatin', it wasn't our fault.

By August the whole town was talkin'. They had it all settled. 'Cordin' to the gossip-spreaders there could be only one reason for Pullet and Miss Letitia bein' together so much — they was cal'latin' to marry. The weddin' day was prophesied and set anywheres from to-morrer to next Christmas. I thought such talk ought to be stopped. Jim Henry didn't.

"Why?" says he.

"*Why!*" I says. "Because it's foolishness, that's why. 'Cause there's no truth in it and you know it."

"No, I don't know," says he. "Stranger things than that have happened."

"*She* marry that old fossilized pauper!"

"Why not? He's a gentleman and a scholar, if he *is* poor. She's rich, but if there's one thing she isn't, it's a scholar."

"Humph! fur's that goes," says I, "she ain't a gentleman, either — though she's next door to it."

"That's all right. Skipper, there's some things money can't buy. Pullet's got book learnin' and treed ancestors and she ain't. She's got money and he ain't. Both want what t'other's best fixed in. If old Beanblossom had any sand, I should believe 'twas a sure thing. I guess I'll drop him a hint."

"My land!" I sang out; "don't you do it. The fat'll all be in the fire then."

"Skipper," says he, "you're a cagey old bird, but you don't know it all. There's some things you can leave to me. And, anyhow, whether the weddin' bells chime or not, all this talk is good free advertisin' for the store."

'Twa'n't long after this that the genealogical man begun to seem less gay-like. He and Letitia was

together as much as ever, the Pendlebury tree and the Beanblossom tree — he worked on both at the same time — was flourishin', after the topsy-turvy way of such vegetables — from the upper branches down towards the trunks; but there was a look on Pullet's face as he pawed through his books and papers that I couldn't understand. He looked worried and troubled about somethin'.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, once. "Ain't your ancestors turnin' up satisfactory?"

"Yes," he says, polite as ever, but sort of condescendin' and proud, "the Beanblossom history is, if you will permit me to say so, a very satisfactory record indeed."

"And the Pendleburys?" says I. "George Washin'ton was first cousin on their ma's side, I s'pose."

He didn't answer for a minute. Then he wiped his specs with his handkerchief. "The Pendlebury records are," he says, slow, "a trifle more confused and difficult. But I am progressin'— yes, Cap'n Snow, I think I may say that I am progressin'."

The thunderbolt hit us, out of a clear sky, the fust week in September. Yet I s'pose we'd ought to have seen it comin' at least a day ahead. That day the Pendlebury gasoline carryall come buzzin' up to the front platform and Letitia steps out, grand as the Queen of Sheba, of course.

"Cap'n Snow," says she, and it seemed to me that she hesitated just a minute, "is Mr. Beanblossom about?"

"No," says I, "he ain't. I don't know where he is exactly. He was in the store this mornin' askin' about a letter he's expectin' from the Genealogical Society folks, but he went out right afterwards and I ain't seen him since. I s'posed, of course, he was up to your house."

"No," she says, and I thought she colored up a little mite; "he has not been there since day before yesterday. Perhaps that is natural, under the circumstances," speakin' more to herself than to me, "but . . . however, will you kindly tell him I called before leavin' for the city. I am goin' to Boston on a shoppin' excursion," she adds, condescendin'. "I shall return on Wednesday."

She went away. Pullet didn't show up until night and then the first thing he asked for was the mail. When I told him about the Pendlebury woman he turned round and went out again.

Next day was Saturday and we was pretty busy, that is, Jim Henry and the clerk was busy. I was about as much use as usual, and, as for Pullet, he was no use at all. A big green envelope from the Genealogical Society come for him in the morning mail — he was always gettin' letters from that Society — and he grabbed at it and went out on the plat-

form. A little while afterwards I saw him roostin' on a box out there, with his hair, what there was of it, all rumpled up, and an expression of such everlastin', world-without-end misery on his face that I stopped stock still and looked at him.

"For the mercy sakes," says I, "what's happened?"

He turned his head, stared at me fishy-eyed, and got up off the box.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is the world comin' to an end?"

He put one hand to his head and waved the other up and down like a pump handle.

"Yes," he sings out, frantic like. "It is ended already. It is all over. I — I —"

And with that he jumps off the platform and goes staggerin' up the road. I'd have follered him, but just then Jim Henry calls to me from inside the store and in a little while I'd forgot Beanblossom altogether. I thought of him once or twice durin' the day, but 'twa'n't till about shuttin'-up time that I thought enough to mention him to Jacobs. Then he mentioned him fust.

"Whew!" says he, settin' down for the fust time in two hours. "Whew! I'm tired. This has been the best day this concern has had since I took hold of it, and I've worked like a perpetual motion machine. We'll need another boy pretty soon, Skip-

per. Pullet's no good as a salesman. By the way, where *is* Pullet? I ain't seen him since noon."

Neither had I, now that I come to think of it.

"I wonder if the poor critter's sick," I says. Then I started to tell how queer he'd acted out on the platform. I'd just begun when Amos Hallett's boy come into the store with a note.

"It's for you, Cap'n Zeb," he says, all out of breath. "I meant to give it to you afore, but I just this minute remembered it. Mr. Beanblossom, he give it to me at the depot when he took the up train."

"Took the up train?" says I. "Who did? Not Pul — Mr. Beanblossom?"

"Yes," says the boy. "He's gone to Boston, leastways the depot-master said he bought a ticket for there. Why? Didn't you know it? He —"

I was too astonished to speak at all, but Jim Henry was cool as usual.

"Yes, yes, son," he says. "It's all right. You trot right along home afore you catch cold in your freckles." Then, after the youngster'd gone, he turns to me quick. "Open it, Skipper," he orders. "Somethin's happened. Open it."

I opened the envelope. Inside was a sheet of foolscap covered from top to bottom with mighty shaky handwritin'. I read it out loud.

"*Captain Zebulon Snow,*

"DEAR SIR:

"Polite as ever, ain't he?" I says. "He'd been genteel if he was writin' his will."

"Go on!" snaps Jacobs. "Hurry up."

"DEAR SIR: When you receive this I shall have left Ostable, it may be forever. I have made a horrible discovery, which has wrecked all my hopes and my life. In accordance with Mr. Jacob's kindly counsel, I recently summoned courage to ask Miss Pendlebury to become my wife.

"Good heavens to Betsy!" I sang out, almost droppin' the letter.

"Go on!" shouts Jacobs. "Don't stop now."

"But he asked her to *marry* him!" I gasps. "In accordance with your advice — *yours!* Did *you* have the cheek to —"

"*Will* you go on? Of course I advised him. We'd got the Pendlebury trade, hadn't we? Can you think of any surer way to cinch it than to have those two idiots marry each other? Go on — or give me the letter."

I went on, as well as I could, everything considered.

"She did not refuse. She was kinder than I had a right to expect. I realized my presumption, but —"

"Skip that," orders Jim Henry. "Get down to brass tacks."

I skipped some. . . .

"She told me she must have a few days' time to consider. I waited. To-day I received a communication from the Genealogical Society which has dashed my hopes to the ground. It was in connection with my work on the Pendlebury family tree. For some time I have been very much troubled concerning developments in that work. The later Pendleburys have been ladies and gentlemen of repute and worth, but as I delved deeper into the past and approached the early generations in this country, I—"

"Skip again," says Jacobs.

I skipped.

"And now, to my horror, I find the fact proven beyond doubt. Ezekiel Jonas Pendlebury — whose name should be inscribed upon the trunk of the tree, he being the original settler in America — was hanged in the Massachusetts Bay Colony for stealing a hog upon the Sabbath Day."

Then I *did* drop the letter. "My land of love!" was all I could say. And what Jacobs said was just as emphatic. We stared at each other; and then, all at once, he began to laugh, laugh till I thought he'd never stop. His laughin' made me mad until I commenced to see the funny side of the

thing; then I laughed, too, and the pair of us rocked back and forth and haw-hawed like loons.

"Oh, dear me!" says Jim Henry, wipin' his eyes. "The original Pendlebury hung for hog stealin'!"

"Stealin' it on Sunday," says I. "Don't forget that. Sabbath-breakin' was worse than thievin' in them days."

"Well, go on, go on," says he. "There's more of it, ain't they?"

There was. The writing got finer and finer as it got close to the bottom of the page. Poor Pullet had caved in when that revelation struck him. Honor compelled him to tell Letitia the truth and how could he tell her such a truth as that? She, so proud and all. He had led her into this dreadful research work and she would blame him, of course, and dismiss him with scorn and contempt. Her contempt he could not bear. No, he must go away. He could never face her again. He was goin' to Boston, to his cousin's house in Newton, and stay there for a spell. Perhaps some day, after she had shut up her summer villa and gone, too, he might return; he didn't know. But would we forgive him, etcetery and so forth, and — good-by.

His name was squeezed in the very corner. I looked at Jacobs.

"Well," I says, some disgusted, "it looks to me,

as a man up a tree — not a family tree, neither, thank the Lord — as if instead of cinchin' the Pendlebury trade your 'advice' had queered it forever."

He didn't say nothin'. Just scowled and kicked his heels together. Then he grabbed the letter out of my hand and begun to read it again. I scowled, too, and set starin' at the floor and thinkin'. All at once I heard him swear, a sort of joyful swear-word, seemed to me. I looked up. As I did he swung off the counter, crumpled up the letter, jammed it in his pocket and grabbed up his hat.

"Skipper," he says, his eyes shinin', "there's a night freight to Boston, ain't there?"

"Yes, there is, but —"

"So long, then. I'll be back soon's I can. You and Bill"— that was the clerk —"must do as well as you can for a day or so. So long. But you just remember this: Old Doctor James Henry Jacobs, specialist in sick businesses, ain't given up hopes of this patient yet, not by any manner of means. By, by."

He was gone afore I could say another word, and for the rest of that night and all day Sunday and until Monday evenin's train come in, I was like a feller walkin' in his sleep. All creation looked crazy and I was the only sane critter in it.

On Monday evenin' he came sailin' into the store,

all smiles. 'Twas some time afore I could get him alone, but, when I could, I nailed him.

"Now," says I, "perhaps you'll tell me why you run off and left me, and where you've been, and what you mean by it, and a few other things."

He grinned. "Been?" he says. "Well, I've been to see the last of Miss Letitia Pendlebury of Pendlebury Villa, Ostable, Mass. Miss Pendlebury is no more."

"No more!" I hollered. "No *more!* Don't tell me she's dead!"

"I sha'n't," says he, "because she isn't. She's alive, all right, but she's no more Miss Pendlebury. She's Mrs. Winthrop Adams Beanblossom now," he says. "They were married this forenoon."

"Married?"

"Married."

"But — but — after the hangin' news — and the hog-stealin'— and — Does she know it? She wouldn't marry him after *that?"*

"She knows and she was tickled to death to marry him. Skipper, there was a P. S. on the back of that letter of Pullet's. You didn't turn the page over; I did and I recognized the life-saver right off. Here it is."

He passed me Beanblossom's letter, back side up. There was a P. S., but it looked to me more like

the finishin' knock on the head than it did like a life-saver. This was it:

"P. S. I have neglected to state another fact which my researches have brought to light and which makes the affair even more hopeless. My own ancestor, at that time Governor of the Colony, was the person who sentenced Ezekiel Pendlebury and caused him to be hanged."

"And that," says I, "is what you call a life-saver! My nine-times great-granddad has your nine-times great-granddad hung and that removes all my objections to marryin' you. Oh, sure and sartin! Yes, indeed!"

He smiled superior. "Listen, you doubtin' Thomas," says he. "You can't see it, but Sister Letitia saw it right off when I put Pullet's case afore her at the Hotel Somerset, where she was stoppin'. *Her* ancestor was a hog-stealer and a hobo; but Beanblossom's ancestor was a Governor and a nabob from way back. If by just sayin' yes you could swap a pig-thief for a governor, you'd do it, wouldn't you? You would if you'd been braggin' 'family' as Letitia has for the past three months. I saw her, turned on some of my convincin' conversation, saw Pullet at his cousin's and convinced him. They were married at Trinity parsonage this very forenoon."

"My! my! my!" I says, after this had really sunk in. "And the Pendlebury tree is —"

"There ain't any Pendlebury tree," he interrupts. "It's the kindlin'-bin for that shrub. But the *Beanblossom* tree, with governors and judges and generals proppin' up every main limb, is goin' to hang right next to Pa Pendlebury's picture in the mornin' room of Pendlebury Villa. And the head of Pendlebury Villa is the senior partner in the Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store."

He was wrong there. Letitia Pendlebury Beanblossom had another surprise under her bonnet and she sprung it when she got back. She sent for Jacobs and me and made proclamation that her husband would withdraw from the firm.

"I trust that Mr. Beanblossom and I are democratic," she says. "Of course we shall continue to purchase our supplies from you gentlemen. But, really," she says, "you *must* see that a man whose ancestor by direct descent was Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony could scarcely humiliate himself by engaging in *trade*."

So, instead of gettin' out of storekeepin', I was left deeper in it than ever. But Jim Henry cheered me up by sayin' I hadn't really been in it at all yet.

"This foundlin' is only beginnin' to set up and take notice," he says. "Skipper, you put your faith

in old Doctor Jacobs' Teethin' Syrup and Tonic for Business Infants."

"I guess that's where it's put," says I, drawin' a long breath.

"It couldn't be in a better place, could it? No, we've got a good start, but that's all it is. Before I get through you'll see. We've got to make this store prominent and keep it prominent, and the best way to do that is to be prominent ourselves. Skipper, I wish you'd go into politics."

"Politics!" says I, soon as I could catch my breath. "Well, when I do, I give you leave to order my room at the Taunton Asylum. What do you cal'late I'd better try to get elected to — President or pound-keeper?"

He laughed.

"Both of them jobs are filled at the present time," I went on, sarcastic. "So is every other I can think of off-hand."

"That's all right," says he. "Some of these days you'll hold office right in this town. We need political prestige in our business and you, Cap'n Snow, bein' the solid citizen of this close corporation, will have to sacrifice yourself on the altar of public duty."

"Nary sacrifice," says I. Which shows how little the average man knows what's in store for him.

CHAPTER III

I GET INTO POLITICS

WHEN I shook hands with Mary Blaisdell and left her standin' under the wistaria vine at the front door of the little old house that had belonged to Henry, all I said was for her to keep a stiff upper lip and not to be any bluer than was necessary. "Ostable's lost a good postmaster," says I, "and you've lost a kind, thoughtful, providin' brother. I know it looks pretty foggy ahead to you just now and you can't see how you're goin' to get along; but you keep up your pluck and a way'll be provided. Meantime I'm goin' to think hard and perhaps I can see a light somewheres. My owners used to tell me I was consider'ble of a navigator, so between us we'd ought to fetch you into port."

Her eyes were wet, but she smiled, rainbow fashion, through the shower, and said I was awful good and she'd never forget how kind I'd been through it all.

"Whatever becomes of me, Cap'n Snow," she says, "I shall never forget that."

What I'd done wa'n't worth talkin' about, so I said good-by and hurried away. At the top of the hill I turned and looked back. She was still standin' in the door and, in spite of the wistaria and the hollyhocks and the green summer stuff everywheres, the whole picture was pretty forlorn. The little white buildin' by the road, with the sign, "Post-office" over the window, looked more lonesome still. And yet the sight of it and the sight of that sign give me an inspiration. I stood stock still and thumped my fists together.

"Why not?" says I to myself. "By mighty, yes! Why not?"

You see, Henry Blaisdell was one of the few Ostable folks that I'd known as a boy and who was livin' there yet when I came back. He was younger than I, and Mary, his sister, was younger still. I liked Henry and his death was a sort of personal loss to me, as you might say. I liked Mary, too. She was always so quiet and common-sense and comfortable. *She* didn't gossip, and the way she helped her brother in the post-office was a treat to see. She wa'n't exactly what you'd call young, and the world hadn't been all fair winds and smooth water for her, by a whole lot; but, in spite of it, she'd managed to keep sweet and fresh. She and Henry and I had got to be good friends and I gen'rally took a walk up towards their house of a Sunday or

managed to run in at the post-office buildin' at least once every week-day and have a chat with 'em.

When I heard of Henry's dyin' so sudden my fust thought was about Mary and what would she do. How was she goin' to get along? I thought of that even durin' the funeral, and now, the day after it, when I went up to see her, I was thinkin' of it still. And, at last, I believed I had got the answer to the puzzle.

Half the way back to the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store," I was thinkin' of my new notion and makin' up my mind. The other half I was layin' plans to put it through. When I walked into the store, Jim Henry met me.

"Hello, Skipper," says he, brisk and fresh as a no'theast breeze in dog days, "did you ever hear the story about the office-seekin' feller in Washin'ton, back in President Harrison's time? He wanted a gov'ment job and he happened to notice a crowd down by the Potomac and asked what was up. They told him one of the Treasury clerks had been found drowned. He run full speed to the White House, saw the President, and asked for the drowned chap's place. 'You're too late,' says Harrison, 'I've just app'inted the man that saw him fall in.'"

I'd heard it afore, but I laughed, out of polite-

ness, and wanted to know what made him think of the yarn.

"Why," says he, "because that's the way it's workin' here in Ostable. Poor old Blaisdell's funeral was only yesterday and it's already settled who's to be the new postmaster."

Considerin' what I'd been goin' over in my mind all the way home from Mary's, this statement, just at this time, knocked me pretty nigh out of water.

"What?" I gasped. "How did you know?"

"Why wouldn't I know?" says he. "I got the advance information right from the oracle. I was told not ten minutes since that the app'intment was to go to Abubus Payne."

I stared at him. "Abubus Payne!" says I. "Abubus — Are you dreamin'?"

He laughed. "I'd never dream a name like 'Abubus,' he says, 'even after one of our Poquit House dinners. No, it's no dream. The Major was just in and he says his mind is made up. That settles it, don't it? You wouldn't contradict the all-wise mouthpiece of Providence, would you, Cap'n Zeb?"

I never said anything — not then. I was realizin' that, if I wanted Mary Blaisdell to be postmistress at Ostable — which was the inspiration I was took with when I looked back at her from the hill — I'd got to do somethin' besides say. I'd got to work

and work hard. And even at that my work was cut out from the small end of the goods. To beat Major Cobden Clark in a political fight was no boy's job. But Abubus Payne! Abubus Payne postmaster at Ostable!! Think of it! Maybe you can; *I* couldn't without stimulants.

You see, this critter Abubus — did you ever hear such a name in your life? — had lived around 'most every town on the Cape at one time or another. He and his wife wa'n't what you'd call permanent settlers anywhere, but had a habit of breakin' out in new and unexpected places, like a p'ison-ivy rash. He worked some at carpenterin', when he couldn't help it, but his main business, as you might say, had always been lookin' for an easier job. In Ostable he'd got one. He was caretaker and general nurse of Major Cobden Clark. His wife, who was about as shiftless as he was, was the Major's housekeeper.

And the Major? Well, the Major was a star, a planet — yes, in his own opinion, the whole solar system. He was big and fleshy and straight and gray-haired and red-faced. He belonged to land knows how many clubs and societies and milishys, includin' the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Boston and the Old Guard of New York. He had political influence and a long pocketbook and a short temper. Likewise he suffered from pigheadedness and chronic indigestion. 'Twas the in-

digestion that brought him to Ostable and Abubus; or rather 'twas his doctor, Dr. Conquest Payne, the celebrated food and diet specializer — see advertisements in 'most any newspaper — who sent him there. Abubus was Doctor Conquest's cousin and I judge the two of 'em figgered the Clark stomach and income as things too good to be treated outside of the family.

Anyway, the spring afore I landed in Ostable, down comes the Major, buys a good-sized house on the lower road nigh the water front, hires Abubus and his wife to look out for the place and him, and settles down to the simple life, which wa'n't the kind he'd been livin', by a consider'ble sight. But he lived it now; yes, sir, he did! He lived by the clock and he ate and slept by the clock, and that clock was wound up and set accordin' to the rules prescribed by Dr. Conquest Payne, "World Famous Dietitian and Food Specialist"—see more advertisin', with a tintype of the Doctor in the corner.

Nigh as I could find out the diet was a queer one. It give me dyspepsy just to think of it. Breakfast at seven sharp, consistin' of a dozen nut meats, two raw prunes, some "whole wheat bread"—whatever that is — and a pint of hot water. Luncheon at quarter to eleven, with another assortment of similar truck. Afternoon snack at three and dinner at half-past seven. He had two soft b'iled eggs

for dinner, or else a two-inch slice of rare steak, and, with them exceptions, the whole bill of fare was, accordin' to my notion, more fittin' for a goat than a human bein'. He mustn't smoke and he mustn't drink: Considerin' what he'd been used to afore the "World Famous" one hooked him it ain't much wonder that he was as crabbed and cranky as a liveoak windlass.

However, it — or somethin' else — had made him feel better since he landed in Ostable and he swore by that Conquest Payne man and everybody connected with him. And if he once took a notion into his tough old head, nothin' short of a surgeon's operation could get it out. He'd decided to make Abubus postmaster and he'd move heaven and earth to do it. All right, then, it was up to me to do some movin' likewise. I can be a little mite pig-headed myself, if I set out to be.

And I set out right then. It may seem funny to say so, but I was about as good a friend as the Major had in Ostable. Course he had a tremendous influence with the selectmen and the like of that, owin' to his soldier record and his pompousness and the amount of taxes he paid. And he and I never agreed on one single p'int. But just the same he spent the heft of his evenin's at the store and I was always glad to see him. I respected the cantankerous old critter, and liked him, in a way.

And I'm inclined to think he respected and liked me. I cal'late both of us enjoyed fightin' with somebody that never tried for an under-holt or quit even when he was licked.

So that night, when he comes puffin' in and sets down, as usual, in the most comfortable chair, I went over and come to anchor alongside of him.

"Hello," he grunts, "you old salt hayseed. Any closer to bankruptcy than you was yesterday?"

"Your bill's a little bigger and more overdue, that's all," says I. "See here, I want to talk politics with you. Mary Blaisdell, Henry's sister, is goin' to have the post-office now he's gone, and I want you to put your name on her petition. Not that she needs it, or anybody else's, but just to help fill up the paper."

Well, sir, you ought to have seen him! His red face fairly puffed out, like a young-one's rubber balloon. He whirled round on the edge of his chair — he was too big to move in any other part of it — and glared at me. What did I mean by that? Hey? Was my punkin head sp'ilin' now that warm weather had come, or what? Had I heard what he told my partner that very mornin'?

"Yes," says I, "I heard it. But I judged you must have broke your rule about drinkin' liquor, or else your dyspepsy has struck to your brains. No sane person would set out to make Abubus

Payne anythin' more responsible than keeper of a pig pen. You didn't mean it, of course."

He didn't! He'd show me what he meant! Abubus was the most honest, able man on the whole blessed sand-heap, and he was goin' to be postmaster. Mary Blaisdell was an old maid, good enough of her kind, maybe, but the place for her was some kind of an asylum or home for incompetent females. He'd sign a petition to put her in one of them places, but nothin' else. Abubus was just as good as ap-p'inted already.

We had it back and forth. There was consider'ble chair thumpin' and hollerin', I shouldn't wonder. Anyhow, afore 'twas over every loafer on the main road was crowdin' 'round us and Jim Henry Jacobs was pacin' up and down back of the counter with the most worried look on his face ever I see there. It ended by the Major's jumpin' to his feet and headin' for the door.

"You — you — you tarry old imbecile," he hollers, shakin' a fat forefinger at me, "I'll show you a few things. I'll never set foot in this rathole of yours again."

"You better not," I sung out. "If you dare to, I'll —"

"What?" he interrupts. "You'll what? I'll be back here to-morrow night. Then what'll you do?"

"I'll show you Mary Blaisdell's petition," I says. "And the names on it'll make you curl up and quit like a sick caterpillar."

"Humph! I'll show *you* a petition for Abubus Payne, next postmaster of Ostable, with a string of names on it so long you'll die of old age afore you can finish readin' 'em. Bah!"

With that he went out and I went into the back room to wash my face in cold water.

I wrote the headin' to the Blaisdell petition afore I turned in that very night. Next mornin' I hurried over and, after consider'ble arguin', I got Mary to say she'd try for the place. All the rest of that day I put in drivin' from Dan to Beersheby gettin' signatures. And I got 'em, too, a schooner load of 'em. I had the petition ready to show the Major that evenin'; but, when he come into the store, he had a petition, too, just as long as mine. And the worst of it was, in a lot of cases the same names was signed to both papers. Accordin' to those petitions the heft of Ostable folks wanted somebody to keep post-office and they didn't much care who. They wanted to please me and they didn't like to say no to the Major.

He was mad and I was mad and we had another session. But he wouldn't cross the names off and neither would I and so, after another week, both petitions went in as they was. All the good they

seemed to do was that we each got a letter from the Post-office Department and Mary Blaisdell was allowed to hold over her brother's place until somebody was picked out permanent. And every evenin' Major Clark came into the store to tell me Abubus was sure to win and get my prediction that Mary was as good as elected. One week dragged along and then another, and 'twas still a draw, fur's a body could tell. The Washin'ton folks wa'n't makin' a peep.

But old Ancient and Honorable Clark was workin' his wires on the quiet and I must give in that he pulled one on me that I wa'n't expectin'. The whole town had got sort of tired of guessin' and talkin' about the post-office squabble and had drifted back into the reg'lar rut of pickin' their neighbors to pieces. The Major had set 'em talkin' on a new line durin' the last fortni't. He'd been fixin' up his house and havin' the grounds seen to, and so forth. Likewise he'd bought an automobile, one of the nobbiest kind. This was somethin' of a surprise, 'cause afore that he'd been pretty much down on autos and did his drivin' around in a high-seated sort of buggy —" dog cart " he called it — though 'twas hauled by a horse and he hated dogs so that he kept a shotgun loaded with rock salt on his porch to drive stray ones off his premises.

" Who's goin' to run that smell-wagon of yours? "

I asked him, sarcastic. He kept comin' to the store just the same as ever and we had our reg'lar rows constant. I cal'late we'd both have missed 'em if they'd stopped. I know I should.

"Humph!" he snorts; "smell-wagon, hey? If it smells any worse than that old fish dory of yours, I'll have it buried, for the sake of the public health."

By "fish dory" he meant a catboat I'd bought. She was named the *Glide* and she could glide away from anything of her inches in the bay.

"But who's goin' to run that auto?" I asked again. "'Tain't possible you're goin' to do it yourself. If she went by alcohol power, I could understand, but—"

"Hush up!" he says, forgettin' to be mad for once and speakin' actually plaintive. "Don't talk that way, Snow," says he. "If you knew how much I wanted a drink you wouldn't speak lightly of alcohol."

"Why don't you take one, then?" I wanted to know. "I believe 'twould do you good. That and a square meal. If you'd forget your prunes and your nutmeats and your quack doctorin'—"

He was mad then, all right. To slur at the "World Famous" was a good deal worse than murder, in his mind. He expressed his opinion of me, free and loud. He said I'd ought to try Doctor Conquest, myself, for developin' my brains. The

Doctor was pretty nigh a vegetarian, he said, and my head was mainly cabbage — and so on. Incidentally he announced that Abubus was to run the new auto.

"Abubus!" says I. "Why, he don't know a gas engine from a coffee mill! He wouldn't know what the craft's for."

"That's all right," he says. "He's been takin' lessons at the garage in Hyannis and he can run it like a bird. He knows what it's for. He! he! so do I. By the way, Snow, are you ready to give up the post-office to my candidate yet?"

"Give up?" says I. "Tut! tut! tut! I hate to hear a supposed sane man talk so. Mary Blaisdell handles the mail in the Ostable post-office for the next three years — longer, if she wants to."

"Bet you five she don't," he says.

"Take the bet," says I.

He went out chucklin'. I wondered what he had up his sleeve. A week later I found out. Congressman Shelton, our district Representative at Washin'ton, came to Ostable to look the post-office situation over and, lo and behold you, he comes as Major Cobden Clark's guest, to stay at his house.

When Jim Henry Jacobs learned that, he took me to one side to give me some brotherly advice.

"It's all up for Mary now," he says. "She can't win. Clark and Shelton are old chums in poli-

tics. There's only one chance to beat Payne and that's to bring for'ard a compromise candidate — a dark horse."

"Rubbish!" I sung out. "Dark horse be hanged! Shelton's square as a brick. Nobody can bribe him."

"It ain't a question of bribin'," he says. "If it was, you could bribe, too. Shelton is square, and that's why he'd welcome a compromise candidate. But if it comes to a fight between Mary Blaisdell and Abubus Payne, Abubus'll win because he's the Major's pet. Shelton knows the Major better than he knows you. Take my advice now and look out for the dark horse."

But I wouldn't listen. All the next hour I was ugly as a bear with a sore head and long afore dinner time I told Jacobs I was goin' for a sail in the *Glide*. "Goin' somewheres on salt water where the air's clean and not p'isoned by politics and automobiles and congressmen and Paynes," I told him.

I headed out of the harbor and then run, afore a wind that was fair but gettin' lighter all the time, up the bay. I sailed and sailed until some of my bad temper wore off and my appetite begun to come back. All the time I was settin' at the tiller I was thinkin' over the post-office situation and, try as hard as I could to see the bright side for Mary Blaisdell, it looked pretty dark. The Major would give that Shelton man the time of his life and he'd talk

Abubus to him to beat the cars. I couldn't get at the Congressman to put in an oar for Mary and — well, I'd have discounted my five-dollar bet for about seventy-five cents, at that time.

I thought and thought and sailed and sailed. When I came to myself and realized I was hungry the *Glide* was miles away from Ostable. I came about and started to beat back; then I saw I was in for a long job. Let alone that the wind was ahead, 'twas dyin' fast, and if I knew the signs of a flat calm, there was one due in half an hour. I took as long tacks as I could, but I made mighty little progress.

On the second tack inshore I came up abreast of Jonathan Crowell's house at Heron P'int. Jonathan's just a no-account longshoreman or he wouldn't live in that place, which is the fag-end of creation. There's a twenty-mile stretch of beach and pines and such close to the shore there, with a road along it. The first eight mile of that road is pretty good macadam and hard dirt. A land company tried to develop that section of beach once and they put in the road; but the land didn't sell and the company busted and after that eight mile the road is just beach sand, soft and coarse. The strip of solid ground, with its pines and scrub-oaks, is, as I said afore, twenty mile long, but it's only a half mile or so wide. Between it and the main cape is a tre-

mendous salt marsh, all cut up with cricks that nobody can get over without a boat. Jonathan's is the only house for the whole twenty mile, except the lighthouse buildin's down at the end. The land company put up a few summer shacks on speculation, but they're all rickety and fallin' to pieces.

I knew Jonathan had gone to Bayport, quahaug rakin', and that his wife was visitin' over to Wellmouth, so when the *Glide* crept in towards the beach and I saw a couple of folk by the Crowell house, I was surprised. I didn't pay much attention to 'em, however, until I was just about ready to put the helm over and stand out into the bay again. Then they come runnin' down to the beach, yellin' and wavin' their arms. I thought one of 'em had a familiar look and, as I come closer, I got more and more sure of it. It didn't seem possible, but it was — one of those fellers on the beach was Major Cobden Clark.

"Hi-i!" yells the Major, hoppin' up and down and wavin' both arms as if he was practicin' flyin'; "Hi-i-i! you man in the boat! Come here! I want you!"

That was him, all over. He wanted me, so of course I must come. My feelin's in the matter didn't count at all. I run the *Glide* in as nigh the beach as I dared and then fetched her up into what little wind there was left.

"Ahoy there, Major," I sung out. "Is that you?"

"Hey?" he shouts. "Do you know — Why, I believe it's Snow! Is that you, Snow?"

"Yes, it's me," I hollers. "What in time are you doin' way over here?"

"Never mind what I'm doin'," he roared. "You come ashore here. I want you."

If I hadn't been so curious to know what he was doin', I'd have seen him in glory afore I ever thought of obeyin' an order from him; but I was curious. While I was considerin', the breeze give a final puff and died out altogether. That settled it. I might as well go ashore as stay aboard. I couldn't get anywhere without wind. So I hove anchor and dropped the mains'l.

"Come on!" he kept yellin'. "What are you waitin' for? Don't you hear me say I want you?"

I had on my long-legged rubber boots and the water wa'n't more'n up to my knees. When I got good and ready, I swung over the side and waded to the beach.

"Hello, Maje," I says, brisk and easy, "you ought not to holler like that. You'll bust a b'iler. Your face looks like a red-hot stove already."

He mopped his forehead. "Shut up, you old fool," says he. "Think I'm here to listen to a lecture about my face? You carry Mr. Shelton

and me out to that boat of yours. We want you to sail us home."

So the other chap was the Congressman. I'd guessed as much. I went up to him and held out my hand.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Shelton," says I. "Had the pleasure of votin' for you last fall."

Shelton shook and smiled. "This is Cap'n Snow, isn't it?" he says, his eyes twinklin'. "Glad to meet you, I'm sure. I've heard of you often."

"I shouldn't wonder," says I. "Major Clark and me are old chums and I cal'late he's mentioned my name at least once. Hey, Maje?"

The Major grinned. I grinned, too; and Shelton laughed out loud.

"I never saw such a talkin' machine in my life," snaps Clark. "Don't stop to tell us the story of your life. Take us aboard that boat of yours. You've got to get us back to Ostable, d'you understand?"

"Have, hey?" says I. "I appreciate the honor, but . . . However, maybe you won't mind tellin' me what you're doin' here, twelve miles from nowhere?"

The Major was too mad to answer, so Shelton did it for him.

"Well," he says, smilin' and with a wink at his partner, "we *came* in the Major's auto, but—"

He stopped without finishin' the sentence.

"The auto?" says I. "You came in the auto? Well, why don't you go back in it? What's the matter? Has it broke down? Humph! I ain't surprised; them things are always breakin' down, 'specially the cheap ones."

That stirred up the kettle. The Major give me to understand that his auto cost six thousand dollars and was the best blessedty-blank car on earth. It wa'n't the auto's fault. It hadn't broke down. It had stuck in the eternal and everlastin' sand and they couldn't get it out, that was the trouble.

"But Abubus can get it out, can't he?" says I. "Abubus runs it like a bird, you told me so yourself. Now a bird can fly, and if you want to get from here to Ostable in anything like a straight line, you've *got* to fly. By the way, where is Abubus?"

Three or four more questions, and a hogshead of profanity on the Major's part, and I had the whole story. He and Shelton had started for a ride way up the Cape. They was cal'latin' to get home by eleven o'clock, but the machine went so fast that they got where they was goin' early and had time to spare. Shelton happened to remember that he'd sunk some money in the land company I mentioned and he thought he'd like to see the place where 'twas sunk. He asked Abubus if they couldn't run along the beach road a ways. Abubus hemmed and

hawed and didn't know for sure — he never was sure about anything. But the Major said course they could; that car could go anywhere. So they turned in way up by Sandwich and come b'ilin' down alongshore. Long's the old land company road lasted they was all right, but when, runnin' thirty-five miles an hour, they whizzed off the end of that road, 'twas different. The automobile lit in the soft sand like a snow-plow and stopped — and stayed. They tried to dig it out with boards from Jonathan Crowell's pig pen, but the more they dug the deeper it sunk. At last they give it up; nothin' but a team of horses could haul that machine out of that sand. So Abubus starts to walk the ten or eleven miles back to civilization and livery stables and the Major and Shelton waited for him. And the more they waited the hungrier and madder Clark got. 'Twas all Abubus's fault, of course. He ought to have had more sense than to run that way on that road, anyhow. He ought to have known better than to get into that sand, a feller that had lived in sand all his life. He was an incompetent jackass. Well, I knew that afore, but it certainly did me good to hear the Major confirm my judgment.

I went over and looked at the automobile. It had always acted like a mighty lively contraption, but now it looked dead enough. And not only dead, but two-thirds buried.

"Well?" fumes Clark, "how much longer have we got to stay in this hole?"

"It's consider'ble of a hole," says I, "and it looks to me as if she'd stay there till Abubus gets back with a pair of horses. Considerin' how far he's got to tramp and how long it'll be afore he can get a pair, I cal'late the hole'll be occupied until some time in the night."

That wa'n't what he meant and I knew it. Did I suppose he and Shelton was goin' to wait and starve until the middle of the night? No, sir; the auto could stay where it was; he and the Congressman would sail home with me in the *Glide*.

"I hope you ain't in any partic'lar hurry," says I, lookin' out over the bay. There wa'n't a breath of air stirrin' and the water was slick and shiny as a starched shirt. "The *Glide* runs by wind power and there's no wind. This calm may last one hour or it may last two. As long as it lasts I stay where I am."

What! Did I think they would stay there just because I was too lazy to get my whoopety-bang fish-dory under way? Stay there in that sand-heap — sand-heap was the politest of the names he called Crowell's plantation — and starve?

"Oh," says I. "I won't starve. I'm goin' to get dinner."

Dinner! The very name of it was like a life-

preserver to a feller who'd gone under for the second time.

"Can you get us dinner?" roars the Major. "By George, if you can I'll —"

"Not for you I can't," I says. "You live accordin' to the Payne schedule, on prunes and pecans and such. The prune crop 'round here is a failure and I don't see a pecan tree in Jonathan's back yard. No, any dinner I'd get would give you compound, gallopin' dyspepsy, and I can't be responsible for your death — I love you too much. But I cal'late I can scratch up a meal that'll keep folks with common insides from perishin' of hunger. Anyhow, I'm goin' to try."

CHAPTER IV

HOW I MADE A CLAM CHOWDER; AND WHAT A CLAM CHOWDER MADE OF ME

WELL, sir, even the Major's guns was spiked for a minute. I cal'late that, for once, he'd forgot all about his dietizin' and only remembered his appetite. He gurgled and choked and glared. Afore he could get his artillery ready for a broadside I walked off and left him. He'd riled me up a little and I saw a chance to rile him back.

I went around to the back part of the Crowell house and tried the kitchen door. 'Twas locked, for a wonder, but the window side of it wasn't. I pushed up the sash and reached in fur enough to unhook the door. Then I went into the house and begun to overhaul the supplies in the galley. I found flour and sugar and salt and pepper and coffee and butter and canned milk and salt pork — about everything I wanted. Jonathan and I was friendly enough so's I knew he wouldn't care what I used so long as I paid for it. If he had I'd have taken the risk, just then.

The wood-box was full and I got a fire goin' in

the cookstove, and put on a couple of kettles of water to heat. Then I went out to the shed and located a clam hoe and a bucket. There's clams a-plenty 'most anywheres along that beach and the tide was out fur enough for me to get a bucketfull of small ones in no time. I fetched 'em up to the house and set down on the back step to open 'em.

The Major and Shelton was watchin' me all this time and they looked interested — that is, the Congressman did, and Clark was doin' his best not to. Pretty soon Shelton walks over and asks a question.

"What are you doin' with those things, Cap'n Snow?" says he, referrin' to the clams.

"Oh," says I, cheerful, "I'm figgerin' on makin' a chowder, if nothin' busts."

"A chowder," he says, sort of eager. "A clam chowder? Can you?"

"I can. That is, I have made a good many and I cal'late to make this one, unless I'm struck with paralysis."

"A clam chowder!" he says again, sort of eager but reverent. "By George! that's good — er — for you, I mean."

"I hope 'twill be good for you, too," says I. "I'm sorry that Major Clark's dyspepsy's such that 'twon't be good for him, but that's his misfortune, not my fault."

Shelton looked sort of queer and went away to jine his chum. The two of 'em did consider'ble talkin' and the Major appeared to be deliverin' a sermon, at least I heard a good many orthodox words in the course of it. I finished my clam openin', went in and got my cookin' started. The flour and the butter made me think that some hot spider-bread would go good with the chowder and I started to mix a batch. Then I got another idea.

'Twas too late for huckleberries and such, but out back of the shed, beyond the pines, was a little swampy place. I took a tin pail, went out there and filled the pail with early wild cranberries in five minutes. As I was comin' back I noticed an onion patch in the garden. A chowder without onions is like a camp-meetin' Sunday without your best girl — pretty flat and impersonal. Most of those left in the patch had gone to seed, but I got a half dozen.

After a short spell that kitchen begun to get fragrant and folksy, as you might say. The coffee was b'ilin', the chowder was about ready, there was a pan of red-hot spider-bread on the back of the stove and a cranberry shortcake — 'twould have been better with cream, but to skim condensed milk is more exercise than profit — in the oven. I'd opened all the windows and the door, so the smell

drifted out and livened up the surroundin' scenery. Clark and Shelton were settin' on a sand hummock a little ways off and I could see 'em wrinklin' their noses.

When the table was set and everything was ready I put my head out of the window and hollered:

"Dinner!" I sung out.

There wa'n't any answer. The pair on the hummock stirred and acted uneasy, but they didn't move. I ladled out some of the chowder and the perfume of it got more pervadin' and extensive. Then I rattled the dishes and tried again.

"Dinner!" I hollered. "Come on; chowder's gettin' cold."

Still they didn't move and I begun to think my fun had been all for myself. I was disappointed, but I set down to the table and commenced to eat. Then I heard a noise. The pair of 'em had drifted over to the doorway and was lookin' in.

"Hello!" says I, blowin' a spoonful of chowder to cool it. "Am I givin' a good imitation of a hungry man? If I ain't, appearances are deceitful."

"*Hog!*" snarls Clark, with enthusiasm.

"Not at all," says I. "There's plenty of everything and Mr. Shelton's welcome. So would you be, Major, if there was anything aboard you could eat. I'm awful sorry about them prunes and nut-

meats. I only wish Crowell had laid in a supply — I do so."

The Major's mouth was waterin' so he had to swallow afore he could answer. When he did I realized what he was at his best. Shelton didn't say a word, but the looks of him was enough.

"My, my!" says I, "I'm glad I made a whole kettleful of this stuff; I can use a grown man's share of it."

Shelton looked at Clark and Clark looked at him. Then the Major yelps at him like a sore pup.

"Go ahead!" he shouts. "Go ahead in! Don't stand starin' at me like a cannibal. Go in and eat, why don't you?"

You could see the Congressman was divided in his feelin's. He wanted dinner worse than the Old Harry wanted the backslidin' deacon, but he hated to desert his friend.

"You're sure —" he stammered. "It seems mean to leave you, but . . . Sure you wouldn't mind? If it wasn't that you are on a diet and *can't* eat I shouldn't think of it, but —"

"Shut up!" The Major fairly whooped it to Jericho. "If you talk diet to me again I'll kill you. Go in and eat. Eat, you idiot! I'd just as soon watch two pigs as one. Go in!"

So Shelton came in and I had a plate of chowder waitin' for him. He grabbed up his spoon and

didn't speak until he'd finished the whole of it. Then he fetched a long breath, passed the plate for more, and says he:

"By George, Cap'n, that is the best stuff I ever tasted. You're a wonderful cook."

"Much obliged," says I. "But you ain't competent to judge until after the third helpin'. And now you try a slab of that spider-bread and a cup of coffee. And don't forget to leave room for the shortcake because . . . Well, I swan to man! Why, Major Clark, are you crazy?"

For, as sure as I'm settin' here, old Clark had come bustin' into that kitchen, yanked a chair up to that table, grabbed a plate and the ladle and was helpin' himself to chowder.

"Major!" says I.

"Why, *Cobden!*" says Shelton.

"Shut up!" roars the Major. "If either of you say a word I won't be responsible for the consequences."

We didn't say anything and neither did he. Judgin' by the silence 'twas a mighty solemn occasion. Everybody ate chowder and just thought, I guess.

"Pass me that bread," snaps Clark.

"But Cobden," says Shelton again.

"It's hot," says I, "and it's fried, and —"

"Give it to me! If you don't I shall know it's

because you're too rip-slap stingy to part with it."

After that, there was nothin' to be done but the one thing. He got the bread and he ate it — not one slice, but two. And he drank coffee and ate a three-inch slab of shortcake. When the meal was over there wa'n't enough left to feed a healthy canary.

"Now," growls the Major, turnin' to Shelton, "have you a cigar in your pocket? If you have, hand it over."

The Congressman fairly gasped. "A cigar!" he sings out. "You — goin' to *smoke? You?*"

"Yes — me. I'm goin' to die anyway. This murderer here," p'intin' to me, "laid his plans to kill me and he's succeeded. But I'll die happy. Give me that cigar! If you had a drink about you I'd take that."

He bit the end off his cigar, lit it, and slammed out of that kitchen, puffin' like a soft-coal tug. Shelton shook his head at me and I shook mine back.

"Do you s'pose he *will* die?" he asked. "He's eaten enough to kill anybody. And with his stomach! And to smoke!"

"The dear land knows," says I. To tell you the truth I was a little conscience-struck and worried. My idea had been to play a joke on Clark — tantalize him by eatin' a square meal that he couldn't touch — and get even for some of the names he'd

called me. But now I wa'n't sure that my fun wouldn't turn out serious. When a man with a lame digestion eats enough to satisfy an elephant nobody can be sure what'll come of it.

The Congressman and I washed the dishes and 'twas a pretty average sorrowful job. Only once, when I happened to glance at him and caught a queer look in his eyes, was the ceremony any more joyful than a funeral. Then the funny side of it struck me and I commenced to laugh. He joined in and the pair of us haw-hawed like loons. Then we was sorry for it.

Shelton went out when the dish-washin' was over. I cleaned up everything, left a note and some money on Jonathan's table and locked up the house. When I got outside there was a fair to middlin' breeze springin' up. Shelton was settin' on the hummock waitin' for me.

"Where — where's the Major?" I asked, pretty fearful.

"He's over there in the shade — asleep," he whispered.

"Asleep!" says I. "Sure he ain't dead?"

"Listen," says he.

I listened. If the Major was dead he was a mighty noisy remains.

He woke up, after an hour or so, and come trampin' over to where we was.

"Well," he snaps, "it's blowin' hard enough now, ain't it? Why don't you take us home?"

"How about the auto?" I asked.

The auto could stay where it was until the horses came to pull it out. As for him he wanted to be took home.

"But — but are you able to go?" asked Shelton, anxious.

What in the sulphur blazes did we mean by that? Course he was able to go! And had Shelton got another cigar in his clothes?

All of the sail home I was expectin' to see that military man keel over and begin his digestion torments. But he didn't keel. He smoked and talked and was better-natured than ever I'd seen him. He didn't mention his stomach once and you can be sure and sartin that I didn't. As we was comin' up to the moorin's in Ostable I'm blessed if he didn't begin to sing, a kind of a fool tune about "Down where the somethin'-or-other runs." Then I *was* scared, because I judged that his attack had started and delirium was settin' in.

Shelton shook hands with me at the landin'.

"You're all right, Cap'n Snow," he says. "That was the best meal I ever tasted and nobody but you could have conjured it up in the middle of a howlin' wilderness. If there's anything I can do for you at any time just let me know."

There was one thing he could do, of course, but I wouldn't be mean enough to mention it then. The Major and I had, generally speakin', fought fair, and I wouldn't take advantage of a delirious invalid. And just then up comes the invalid himself.

"See here, Snow," says he, pretty gruff; "I'll probably be dead afore mornin', but afore I die I want to tell you that I'm much obliged to you for bringin' us home. Yes, and — and, by the great and mighty, I'm obliged to you for that chowder and the rest of it! It'll be my death, but nothin' ever tasted so good to me afore. There!"

"That's all right," says I.

"No, it ain't all right. I'm much obliged, I tell you. You're a stubborn, obstinate, unreasonable old hayseed, but you're the most competent person in this town just the same. Of course though," he adds, sharp, "you understand that this don't affect our post-office fight in the least. That Blaisdell woman don't get it."

"Who said it did affect it?" I asked, just as snappy as he was. That's the way we parted and I wondered if I'd ever see him alive again.

I didn't see him for quite a spell, but I heard about him. I woke up nights expectin' to be jailed for murder, but I wa'n't; and when, three days later, Shelton started for Washin'ton, the Major went away on the train with him. Abubus and his

wife shut up the house and went off, too, and nobody seemed to know where they'd gone. All's could be found out was that Abubus acted pretty ugly and wouldn't talk to anybody. This was comfortin' in a way, though, most likely, it didn't mean anything at all.

But at the end of two weeks a thing happened that meant somethin'. I got two letters in the mail, one in a big, long envelope postmarked from the Post-Office Department at Washington and the other a letter from Shelton himself. I don't suppose I'll ever forget that letter to my dyin' day.

"Dear Captain Snow," it begun. "You may be interested to know that our mutual friend, Major Clark, has suffered no ill effects from our picnic at the beach. In fact, he is better than he ever was and has been enjoying the comforts of city life to an extent which I should not dare attempt. Whether his long respite from such comforts helped, or whether the celebrated Doctor Conquest was responsible, I know not. The Major, however, declares Doctor Payne to be a fraud and to have been, as he says, 'working him for a sucker.' Therefore he has discharged the doctor and discharged the cousin with the odd name — your fellow townsman, Abubus Payne. The mishap with the auto was the beginning of Abubus's finish and the fact that no indigestion followed our chowder party completed it. And also — which may interest you still more — Major Clark has withdrawn his sup-

port of Payne's candidacy for the post-office and urged the appointment of another person, one whom he declares to be the only able, common-sense, honest *man* in the village. As I have long felt the appointment of a compromise candidate to be the sole solution of the problem, I was very happy to agree with him, particularly as I thoroughly approve of his choice. When you learn the new postmaster's name I trust you may agree with us both. I know the citizens of Ostable will do so.

"Yours sincerely,

"WILLIAM A. SHELTON.

"P. S. I am coming down next summer and shall expect another one of your chowders."

My hands shook as I ripped open the other envelope. I knew what was comin'— somethin' inside me warned me what to expect. And there it was. Me — *me* — Zebulon Snow, was app'inted postmaster of Ostable!

Was I mad? I was crazy! I fairly hopped up and down. What in thunder did I want of the postmastership? And if I wanted it ever so much did they think I was a traitor? Was it likely that I'd take it, after workin' tooth and nail for Mary Blaisdell? What would Mary say to me? By time, *I'd* show 'em! It should go back that minute and my free and frank opinion with it. I'd kicked one chair to pieces already, and was beginnin'

on another, when Jim Henry Jacobs come runnin' in and stopped me.

No use to goin' into particulars of the argument we had. It lasted till after one o'clock next mornin'. Jim Henry argued and coaxed and proved and I ripped and vowed I wouldn't. He was tickled to death. The post-office was the greatest thing to bring trade that the store could have, and so on. I *must* take the job. If I didn't somebody else would, somebody that, more'n likely, we wouldn't like any better than we did Abubus.

"No," says I. "*No!* Mary Blaisdell shall have —"

"She won't get it anyway," says he. "She's out of it — Shelton as much as says so — whatever happens. And she don't want the title anyway. All she needs or cares for is the pay and I've thought of a way to fix that. You listen."

I listened — under protest, and the upshot of it was that the next day I went up to see Mary. She'd heard that I was likely to get the appointment — old Clark had been doin' some hintin' afore he left town, I cal'late — and she congratulated me as hearty as if 'twas what she'd wanted all along. But I wa'n't huntin' congratulations. I felt as mean as if I'd been took up by the constable for bein' a chicken thief, and I told her so.

"Mary," says I, "I wa'n't after the postmaster-

ship. I swear by all that is good and great I wa'n't. I don't know what you must think of me."

"What I've always thought," says she, "and what poor Henry thought before he died. My opinion is like Major Clark's," with a kind of half smile, "that the appointment has gone to the best man in Ostable."

"My, my!" says I. "*Your* digestion ain't given you delirium, has it? No sir-ee! I'm no more fit to be postmaster than a ship's goat is to teach school."

"You mustn't talk so," she says, earnest. "You will take the position, won't you?"

"I'll take it," says I, "under one condition." Then I told her what the condition was. She argued against it at fust, but after I'd said flat-footed that 'twas either that or the government could take its appointment and make paper boats of it, and she'd seen that I meant it, she give in.

"But," says she, chokin' up a little, "I know you're doin' this just to help me. How I can ever repay your kindness I don't —"

I cut in quick. My deadlights was more misty than I like to have 'em. "Rubbish!" says I, "I'm doin' it to win my bet with old Clark. I'd do anything to beat out that old critter."

So it happened that when, along in November, the Major came back to Ostable to look over his

place, afore leavin' for Florida, and come into the store, I was ready for him. He grinned and asked me if he had any mail.

"While you're about it," he says, chucklin', "you can pay me that bet."

Now the very sound of the word "bet" hit me on a sore place. I'd lost one hat to Mr. Pike and the letter I'd got from him rubbed me across the grain every time I thought of it.

"What bet?" says I.

"Why, the bet you made that the Blaisdell woman would be postmistress here."

"I didn't bet that," I says.

"You didn't?" he roared. "You did, too! You bet —"

"I bet that Mary would handle the mail, that's all. So she will; fact is, she's handlin' it now. She's my assistant in the post-office here. If you don't believe it, go back to the mail window and look in. No, Major, *I* win the bet."

Maybe I did, but he wouldn't pay it. He vowed I was a low down swindler and a "welsher," whatever that is. He blew out of that store like a toy typhoon and I didn't see him again until the next summer. However, I had a feelin' that Major Cobden Clark wa'n't the wust friend I had, by a consider'ble sight.

You see, that was Jim Henry's great scheme —

to hire Mary to run the office as my assistant. He didn't say what salary I was to pay her, and, if I chose to hand over three-quarters of the postmaster's pay to her, what business was it of his? I told him that plain, and, to do him justice, he didn't seem to care.

But he did rub it in about my declarin' I'd never go into politics.

In a little while the mail department was as much a part of the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store" as the calico and dress goods counter. We bought the Blaisdell letter-box rack and fixin's and set 'em up and they done fust-rate for the time bein'. I was postmaster, so fur as name goes, but 'twas Mary that really run that end of the ship. It seemed as natural to have her come in mornin's, as it did for the sun to rise; and, if she was late, which didn't happen often, it seemed almost as if the sun hadn't rose. The old store needed somethin' like her to keep it clean and sweet and even Jim Henry give in that she was the best investment the business had made yet.

As for business it kept on good, even though the summer folks had gone and winter had set in. Our order carts kept runnin' and they *took* orders, too. The store was doin' well by us both and I certainly owed old Pullet a debt of thanks for workin' on my sympathies until I put my cash into it. There

was consider'ble buildin' goin' on in town and, when spring begun to show symptoms of makin' Ostable harbor, Jim Henry got possessed of a new idea. I didn't pay much attention at fust. He was always as full of notions as a peddler's cart and if I took every one of 'em serious we'd either been Rockefellers or star boarders at the poorhouse, one or t'other. 'Twa'n't till that day in April when old Ebenezer Taylor came in after his mail and went out after the constable that I realized somethin' had to be done.

You see, Ebenezer's eyes was failin' on him and, to make things worse, he'd forgot his nigh-to specs and had on his far-off pair. Consequently, when he headed for the after end of the store, he wa'n't in no condition to keep clear of the rocks and shoals in the channel. Fust thing he run into was a couple of dress-forms with some bargain calico gowns on 'em. While he was beggin' pardon of them forms, under the impression that they was women customers, he backed into a roll of barbed wire fencin' that was leanin' against the candy and cigar counter. His clothes was sort of thin and if that barbed wire had been somebody tryin' to borrer a quarter of him he couldn't have jumped higher or been more emphatic in his remarks. The third jump landed him against the gunwale of a bushel basket of eggs that Jacobs was makin' a special run on and had

set out prominent in the aisle. Maybe Ebenezer was tired from the jumpin' or maybe the excitement had gone to his head and he thought he was a hen. Anyhow he set on them eggs, and in two shakes of a heifer's tail he was the messiest lookin' omelet ever I see. Jacobs and me and the clerk scraped him off best we could with pieces of barrel hoop and the cheese knife, and Mary come out from behind the letter boxes and helped along with the floor mop, but when we'd finished with him he was consider'ble more like somethin' for breakfast than he was human.

And mad! An April fool chocolate cream couldn't have been more peppery than he was. He distributed his commentaries around pretty general — Mary got some and so did Jacobs — but the heft was fired at me. He hated me anyhow, 'count of my bein' made postmaster and for some other reasons.

"You — you thunderin' murderer!" he hollered, shakin' his old fist in my face. "'Twas all your fault. You done it a-purpose. Look at me! Look! my legs punched full of holes like a skimmer, and — and my clothes! Just look at my clothes! A whole suit ruined! A suit I paid ten dollars and a half for —"

"Ten year and a half ago," I put in, involuntary, as you might say.

"It's a lie. 'Twon't be nine year till next September. You think you're funny, don't you? Ever since this consarned, robbin' Black Republican administration made you postmaster! Postmaster! You're a healthy postmaster! I'll have you arrested! I'll march straight out and have you took up. I will!"

He headed for the door. I didn't say nothin'. I was sorry about the clothes and I'd have paid for 'em willin'ly, but arguin' just then was a waste of time, as the feller said when the deef and dumb man caught him stealin' apples. Ebenezer stamped as fur as the door and then turned around.

"I may not have you took up," he says; "but I'll get even with you, Zeb Snow, yet. You wait."

After he'd gone and we'd made the place look a little less like an egg-nog, I took Jim Henry by the sleeve and led him into the back room where we could be alone. Even there the surroundin's was so cluttered up with goods and bales and boxes that we had to stand edgeways and talk out of the sides of our mouths.

"Jim," says I, "this place of ours ain't big enough. We've got to have more room."

He pretended to be dreadful surprised.

"Why, why, Skipper!" he says. "You shock me. This is so sudden. What put such an idea as that in your head? Seems to me I have a vague

remembrance of handin' you that suggestion no less than twenty-five times since the last change of the moon, but I hope *that* didn't influence you."

"Aw, dry up," says I. "You was right. Let it go at that. Afore I got the postmastership this buildin' was big enough. Now it ain't. We've got to build on or move or somethin'. Have you got any definite plan?"

He smiled, superior and top-lofty, and reached over to pat me on the back; but reachin' in that crowded junk-shop was bad judgment, 'cause his elbow hit against the corner of a tea chest and his next set of remarks was as explosive and fiery as a box of ship rockets.

"Never mind the blessin'," I says. "Go ahead with the fust course. Have you got anything up your sleeve? anything besides that bump, I mean."

Well, it seems he had. Seems he'd thought it all out. We'd ought to buy Philander Foster's buildin', which was on the next lot to ours, move it close up, cut doors through, and use it for the post-office department.

"Humph!" says I, after I'd turned the notion over in my mind. "That ain't so bad, considerin' where it come from. I can only sight one possible objection in the offin'."

"What's that, you confounded Jezebel?" he says.

"Jezebel?" says I. "What on airth do you call me that for?"

"'Cause you're him all over," he says. "He was the feller I used to hear about in Sunday School, the prophet chap that was always croakin' and believed everything was goin' to the dogs. That was Jezebel, wasn't it?"

"No," says I, "that was Jeremiah; Jezebel was the one the dogs *went* to. And she was a woman, at that."

"Well, all right," he says. "Whatever he or she was they didn't have anything on you when it comes to croaks. What's the objection?"

"Nothin' much. Only I don't know's you've happened to think that Philander might not care to sell his buildin', to us or to anybody else."

That was all right. We could go and see, couldn't we? Well, we could of course — and we did.

CHAPTER V

A TRAP AND WHAT THE "RAT" CAUGHT IN IT

FOSTER run a shebang that was labeled "The Palace Billiard, Pool and Sipio Parlors. Cigars and Tobacco. Tonics, all Flavors. Ice Cream in Season." The "Palace" part was some exaggeration and so was the "Parlors," but the place was the favorite hang-out of all the loafers and young sports in town and the church folks was turrible down on it, callin' it a "gilded hell" and such pious profanity. The gilt had wore off years afore and if the hot place ain't more interestin' than that billiard saloon it must be dull for some of the permanent boarders.

We found Philander asleep back of the soft drink counter and young Erastus Taylor —"Ratty," everybody called him — practicin' pin pool, as usual, at one of the tables. "Ratty" was Ebenezer Taylor's only son and the combination trial and idol of the old man's soul. Ebenezer thought most as much of him as he did of his money, and when you've said that you couldn't make it any stronger. He'd done a heap to make a man of "Rat" — his

idea of a man — even separatin' from enough cash to send him to a business college up to Middleboro; but all the boy got from that college was a thunder and lightnin' taste in clothes and a post-graduate course in pool playin'. Pool playin' was the only thing he cared about and he could spot any one of the Ostable sharps four balls and beat 'em hands down. He'd sampled two or three jobs up to Boston, but they always undermined his health and he drifted back home to live on dad and look for another "openin'." I cal'late the pair lived a cat and dog life, for Ratty always wanted money to spend and Ebenezer wanted it to keep. The old man was the wust down on the billiard room of anybody and his son put in most of his time there.

Me and Jim Henry woke up Philander and told him we wanted to talk with him private. He said go ahead and talk; there wa'n't anybody to hear but Ratty, and Rat was just like one of the family. So, as we couldn't do it any different, we went ahead. Jacobs explained that we felt that maybe we might some time or other need a little extry room for our business and, bein' as he — Philander — was handy by and we was always prejudiced in favor of a neighbor and so on, perhaps he'd consider sellin' us his buildin' and lot. Course it didn't make so much difference to him; he could easy move his "Parlors" somewheres else — and similar sweet

"*I* shan't contradict you, Phi," says Ratty.

Jacobs and I looked at each other. Then I got up from my chair.

"Jim Henry," says I, "I don't see as we've got much to gain by staying here. Let's go home."

We went back to the store, neither of us speakin', but both thinkin' hard. It was all off now, of course. If old Taylor owned that mortgage, he'd foreclose on the nail, if only to get rid of his son's loafin' place. And he wouldn't sell to us — hatin' us as he did — unless we covered the place with cash an inch deep. No, buyin' the "Palace" was a dead proposition. And there wa'n't another available buildin' or lot big enough for us to move to within a mile of Ostable Center.

"Humph!" says I, some sarcastic. "It looks to me — speakin' as a man in the crosstrees — as if that wonderful business brain of ours had sprung a leak somewheres, Jim. Better get your pumps to workin', hadn't you?"

He snorted. "I'd rather have a leaky head than a solid wood one like some I know," he says. "Quiet your Jezebellerin' and let me think. . . . There's one thing we might do, of course: We might advance the other five hundred to Foster, let him pay off his mortagage, and then —"

"And then trust to luck to get the money back," I put in. "There's more charity than profit in that,

if you ask me. Once that mortgage is paid, you couldn't get Philander out of that buildin' with a derrick. He don't want to go."

"But we might make some sort of a deal to pay him a hundred dollars or so to boot and then —"

"And then you'd have another hundred to collect, that's all. I wouldn't trust that billiard and sipio man as fur as old Ebenezer could see through his nigh-to specs. No sir-ee! Nothin' doin', as the boys say."

Next forenoon I met old Ebenezer Taylor on the sidewalk in front of the Methodist meetin'-house and, when he saw me, he stopped and commenced chucklin' and gigglin' as if he was wound up.

"He, he, he!" says he. "He, he! I hear you and that partner of yours, Zebulon, want to buy my property next door to you. Well, I'll sell it to you — at a price. He, he, he! at a price."

"So your hopeful and promisin' son's been tellin' tales, has he?" says I. "I wa'n't aware that it was your property — yet."

He stopped gigglin' and glared at me, sour and bitter as a green crab-apple.

"It's goin' to be," he says. "Don't you forget that, it's goin' to be. And if you want it, you'll pay my price. You owe me for them clothes you ruined, Zeb Snow — for them and for other things.

And I cal'late I've got you fellers about where I want you."

"Oh, I don't know," says I. "You may be glad enough to sell to us later on. What good is an empty buildin' on your hands? Unless of course you intend rentin' it for another billiard saloon."

That made him so mad he fairly gurgled.

"There'll be no billiard saloon in this town," he declared. "No more gilded ha'nts of sin, temptin' young men whose parents have spent good money on their education. No, you bet there won't! And that buildin' may not be empty, nuther. I know somethin'. He, he, he!"

"Sho!" says I. "Do you? I wouldn't have believed it of you, Ebenezer."

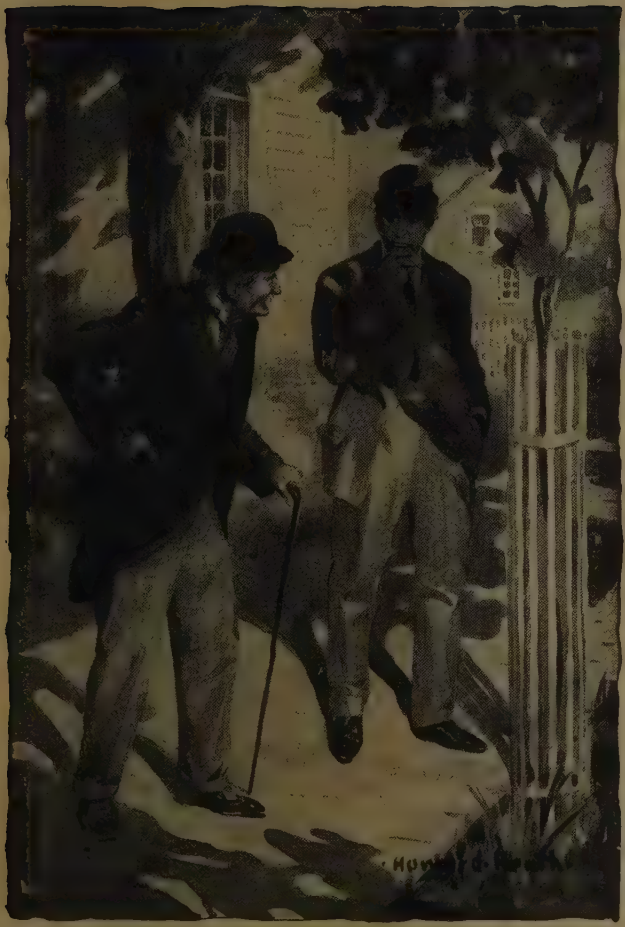
I left him tryin' to think of a fittin' answer, and walked on to the store. Mary called to me from behind the letter-boxes.

"Mr. Jacobs is in the back room," she says, "and he wants to see you right away. Erastus Taylor is with him."

"'Rastus Taylor?" I sung out. "Ratty? What in the world—?"

I hurried into the back room. Sure enough, there was Jim Henry and Ratty caged behind a pile of boxes and barrels.

"Ah, Skipper!" says Jacobs; "is that you? I was hopin' you'd come. Young Taylor here has



"'Well, I'll sell it to you—at a price.'"

been suggestin' an idea that looks good to me. Tell the Cap'n what you've been tellin' me, Ratty."

Rat twisted uneasy on the box where he was settin' and give me a side look out of his little eyes. I never saw him look more like his nickname.

"Well, Cap'n Zeb," he says, "it's like this: I've been thinkin' and I believe I've thought of a way so you and Mr. Jacobs can get Philander's lot and buildin'."

"You have, hey?" says I. "That's interestin', if true. What's the way?"

"Why," says he, twistin' some more, "that mortgage is due on the first of June. If it ain't paid, Philander'll be foreclosed and he'll move out of town. It's only a thousand dollars and Phi's got half of it. If somebody — you and Mr. Jacobs, say — was to lend him t'other half, why then he could pay it off and — and —"

"And stay where he is," I finished disgusted. "That would be real lovely for Philander, but I don't see where we come in. This ain't a billiard and loan society Mr. Jacobs and I are runnin', thankin' you and Foster for the suggestion."

"Wait a minute, Skipper," says Jim Henry. "Your engine is runnin' wild. That ain't Ratty's scheme at all. Go on, Rat; spring it on him."

"Philander wouldn't be so set on stayin' where he is, Cap'n Zeb," says Rat, quick as a flash, "if he

had another place to move into; another place here on the main road, convenient and handy by. And I think I know a place that could be got for him."

I didn't answer for a minute. I was runnin' over in my mind every possible place that might be sold or let to Philander Foster for a "Palace." And to save my life I couldn't think of one.

"Well," says I, at last, "where is it?"

Ratty leaned forward. "What's the matter with Aunt Hannah Watson's buildin' up the street?" he says. "She's been crazy to sell it for a long spell. And the lower floor would make a pretty fair billiard room, wouldn't it?"

I was disgusted. I knew the buildin' he meant, of course. Jacobs and I had talked it over that very mornin' as a possible place to move the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store" to, but we'd both decided it wa'n't nigh big enough.

"Humph!" says I, "that scheme's so brilliant you need smoked glass to look at it. Do you cal'late as good a church woman as Aunt Hannah Watson would sell or let her place for a billiard room? She needs the money bad enough, land knows; but she's as down on those ha'nts of sin as your dad is, Rat Taylor. She'd never sell to Phi Foster in this world."

"*She* mightn't, I give in," answered Rat. "But

her nephew up to Wareham is a diff'rent breed of cats. And since she moved over there to live along with him, he's got the handlin' of her property. I found that out to-day. From what I hear of this nephew man he ain't as particular as his aunt. And, anyway, 'tain't necessary for Philander to make the deal. You and Mr. Jacobs might make it for him."

I thought this over for a minute. I begun to catch the idea that the young scamp had in his noddle — or I thought I did.

"H'm," I says. "Yes, yes. You mean that if we'd lend Philander enough to pay the balance of his mortgage on the buildin' he's in now and would fix it so's Aunt Hannah'd sell us her place, under the notion that *we* was goin' to use it — you mean that then, after June fust, Foster'd swap. He'd move in there and turn over the old 'Palace' to us."

He and Jim Henry both bobbed their heads emphatic.

"That's what he means," says Jim.

"That's the idea exactly, Cap'n," says Rat. "I think Philander might be willin' to do that."

"Is that so!" says I, sarcastic. "Well, well! I want to know! But, say, Ratty, ain't you takin' an awful lot of trouble on Foster's account? You're turrible unselfish and disinterested all to once; or else there's a nigger in the woodpile somewheres. Where do you come in on this?"

He looked pretty average cheap. He fussed and fumed for a minute and then he blurts out his reason. "Well, I'll tell you, Cap'n," he says. "Philander's about the best friend I've got in this bum town and I get more solid comfort in his saloon than anywheres else. If he's drove out of Ostable, I'll be lonesomer than the grave. I don't want him to go. And besides — well, you see, the old man — dad, I mean — has got a notion about settin' me up in business here. And I don't want to be set up — not in his kind of business. I know the kind of business I want to go into, and . . . but never mind that part," he adds, in a hurry.

I smiled. I remembered what old Ebenezer had said about the "Palace" buildin' not bein' empty on his hands very long and about somethin' he knew. It was all plain enough now. He intended openin' some sort of a store there with his son as boss. I almost wished he would. 'Twould be as good as a three-ring circus, that store would, if I knew Ratty. But I was mad, just the same, and when Jim Henry spoke, I was ready for him.

"Well, Skipper," says Jacobs, "what do you think of the plan?"

"Think it's a good one, if you're willin' to heave morals and common honesty overboard — otherwise no. To put up a trick like that on an old widow woman like Aunt Hannah Watson — to land a bil-

liard room on her property, when she'd rather die than have it there, is too close to robbin' the Old Ladies' Home to suit me. I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. So good day to you, Rat Taylor," says I, and walked out.

But Jim Henry Jacobs didn't walk out. No, sir! him and that young Taylor scamp stayed in that back room for another half hour and left it whisperin' in each other's ears and actin' thicker than thieves. I wondered what was up, but I was too put-out and mad to ask.

"I'll look it over right after dinner to-morrer," says Jacobs, as they shook hands at the front door.

"Sure you will, now?" asks Ratty, anxious. "Don't put it off, 'cause it may be too late."

"At one o'clock to-morrer I'll be there," says Jim Henry, and Rat went away lookin' pretty average happy.

Jacobs scarcely spoke to me all the rest of that day nor the next mornin'. As we got up from the boardin' house table the follerin' noon he says, without lookin' me in the face, "I ain't goin' back to the store now. I've got an errand somewheres else."

"Yes," says I, "I imagined you had. You're goin' down to look at that buildin' of poor old Aunt Hannah's. That's where you're goin'. Ain't you ashamed of yourself, Jim Jacobs?"

"Oh, cut it out!" he snaps, savage. "You make

me tired, Skipper. You and your backwoods scruples give me a pain. I've lived where people aren't so narrow and bigoted and I don't consider a billiard room an annex to the hot place. If, by a business deal, I can get that buildin' next door to add to our establishment, I'm goin' to do it, if I have to use my own money and not a cent of yours. Yes, I *am* goin' to look at that Watson property. Now, what have you got to say about it?"

"Why, just this," says I; "I cal'late I'll go with you."

"You will?" he sings out. "*You?*"

"Yes," says I, "me. Not that I feel any different about skinnin' Aunt Hannah than I ever did, but because there's a bare chance that her place may be big enough for us to move the store and post-office to, after all. With that idea and no other, I'll go with you, Jim."

So we went together, though we never spoke more than two words on the way down. We got the key at the jewelry and hardware shop next door and went in. The Watson place was an old-fashioned tumble-down buildin' with a big open lower floor and two or three rooms overhead. I saw right off 'twouldn't do for us to move into, but likewise I saw that the lower floor *might* do for Foster, though 'twa'n't as good as where he was, by consider'ble.

Jim Henry looked the place over.

"No good for us," he snapped.

"None at all," says I.

"Humph!" says he, and we locked up and came down the steps together. As we did so I noticed someone watchin' us from acrost the road.

"There's our friend, Jim Henry," says I. "And, judgin' by the way he's starin', he's got on his fur-off glasses and knows who we are."

He looked across. "Old Taylor, by thunder!" says he. "Well, if my deal goes through we'll jolt the old tight-wad yet."

"Do you mean you're goin' on with that low-down billiard-room game?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he snapped.

"Then you'll do it on your own hook. *I* won't be part or parcel of it."

"Who asked you to?" he wanted to know. And we didn't speak again for the rest of that day. It made me feel bad, because he and I had been mighty friendly, as well as partners together. The only comfort I got out of it was that, judgin' by the way he kept from lookin' at me or speakin', he didn't feel any too good himself.

But that evenin' Ratty drifted in and the pair of 'em had another confab. And next day, after the mail had gone, Jacobs got me alone and says he:

"Well," he says, "I think I ought to tell you that I've written that nephew in Wareham and made him

an offer on the Watson property. I did it on my own responsibility and I'll pay the freight. But I thought perhaps I ought to tell you."

"What did you offer?" I asked. He told me.

"I'll take half," says I, "because I consider it a good investment at that figger. But only with the agreement that the billiard saloon sha'n't go there."

"Then you can keep your money," he says, short. And there was another long spell of not speakin' between the two of us.

Mary noticed that there was somethin' wrong, and it worried her. She spoke to me about it.

"Cap'n Zeb," she says, "what's the trouble between you and Mr. Jacobs? Of course it isn't my business, and you mustn't tell me unless you wish to."

I thought it over. "Well," says I, "I can't tell you just now, Mary. It's a business matter we don't agree on and it's kind of private. I'll tell you some day, but just now I can't. It ain't all my secret, you see."

"I see," says she. "I shouldn't have asked. I beg your pardon. I wasn't curious, but I do hate to see any trouble between you two. I like you both."

I nodded. I was feelin' pretty blue. "Jim's a mighty good chap at heart," I says. "I owe him a lot and he's consider'ble more than just a partner to me."

"He thinks the world of you, too," says she.

"He's told me so a great many times. That is why I can't bear to see you disagree."

I couldn't bear it none too well, either, but Jim Henry showed no signs of givin' in and I wouldn't. So we moped around, keepin' out of each other's way, and actin' for all the world like a couple of young-ones in bad need of a switch.

A couple more days went by afore the answer came from Wareham. When I saw the envelope on the desk, with the Watson man's name in the corner, I knew what it meant and I was on hand when Jim Henry opened it. He was ugly and scowlin' when he ripped off the envelope. Then I heard him swear. I was dyin' to know what the letter said, but I wouldn't have asked him for no money. I walked out to the front of the store. Five minutes later I felt his hand on my shoulder. He had a curious expression on his face, sort of a mixture of mad and glad.

"Skipper," he says, "we're buncoed again. We don't get the Watson place."

"Don't, hey?" says I. "All right, I sha'n't shed any tears. I wa'n't after it, and you know it. But I'm surprised that your offer wa'n't accepted. Why wa'n't it?"

"Because somebody got ahead of me. Here's the letter. Listen to this: 'Your offer for my aunt's property in Ostable came a day too late.

Yesterday I gave a year's option on that property, for five hundred dollars cash, to —' "

"Land of love!" I interrupted. "Only yesterday! That was close haulin', I must say."

"Wait," says he, "you haven't heard the whole of it. 'A year's option . . . for five hundred dollars cash, to Mr. Taylor of your town.' "

"Taylor!" says I. "*Taylor!* My soul and body! The old skinflint beat us again! Well, I swan!"

"Um-hm," says he. "I size it up like this. He saw us come out of there the other day and guessed that we thought of buyin' and movin'. So, as he owed us a grudge, and because the Watson property is, as you said, a good investment anyhow, he makes his option offer on the jump, and beat me to it."

I whistled. "I cal'late you've hit the nailhead, Jim," says I. "Well, to be free and frank, I'm glad of it."

"So am I," says he.

That was a staggerer. I whirled round and looked at him.

"You *are?*" I sung out.

"Yes," says he, "I am. Of course I had my heart set on gettin' that 'Palace' for an addition that would give more room and extry space to our place here; and the only way I could see to get it

was to take up with that Rat's proposition. I haven't any prejudice against billiards —"

"Neither have I, but —"

"I know. And you're right. Old lady Watson has, and to run Foster's establishment in on her would have been a low-down mean trick. I've felt like a thief, but I was so pig-headed I wouldn't back down. Now that I've got it where the chicken got his, I'm glad of it, I really am. Partner, will you forget my meanness and shake hands?"

Would I? I was as tickled as a youngster with a new tin whistle. And so was he.

"There's only one thing that keeps me mad," he says, "and that is that old Ebenezer's got the laugh on us again. As for more room for the store — well, we'll have to think that out."

We thought, but it wa'n't us that got the answer. 'Twas Mary Blaisdell. I told her what our fuss had been about, and she agreed that I was right and that Jim Henry's sharp business sense had sort of run away with him for the time bein'.

"But," says she, "we certainly do need more room, both in the mail department and the store. I've had an idea for some time. Let *me* think a while."

Next day she told Jacobs and me what her idea was. 'Twas that we should build an addition on to our own buildin'. Run it two stories high and

right out into the back yard. 'Twas just the thing and the wonder is that we hadn't thought of it ourselves.

"She's a wonder, Jim, ain't she?" says I, when we was alone together.

"*You* think so, don't you, Skipper," says he, smilin'.

I flared up. "Sartin I do," I says. "Don't you?"

"Indeed I do."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'. Say, have you seen old Taylor lately? I suppose he's crowin' like a Shanghai rooster. I do hate for that old skinflint to have the joke always on his side."

"I know," says I. "So do I. But some day, if we wait long enough, we may have a chance to laugh at him. I've lived a good many year and I've seen it work that way pretty often. We'll wait — and when we do laugh, we'll laugh hard."

And we didn't have to wait so turrible long neither. We got a carpenter in, told him to keep it a secret, but to plan how we could build the back-yard extension. The plannin' and estimatin' kept us busy and we forgot about everything else. Fust along I expected young Taylor would pester us with more schemes, but he didn't. He never came nigh us once, fact is he seemed mighty anxious to keep

out of our way, and so long as he did we didn't complain. His dad come crowin' and chucklin' around a couple of times and finally Jacobs lost his temper and told him if he ever showed his face on our premises again he was liable to be put to the expense of havin' it repaired by the doctor. Ebenezer vowed vengeance and law suits, but he went, and after that he sent a boy for his mail instead of comin' to fetch it himself.

One forenoon, about eleven o'clock 'twas, I was standin' on the store platform, when I heard the Old Harry's own row in the "Palace Billiard, Pool and Sipio Parlors." Loud voices, all goin' at once, and two or three different assortments of language. Jim Henry heard it, too, and come out to listen.

"Skipper," he says, sudden; "what day is this?"

"Why, Thursday," says I, "ain't it? Oh, you mean what day of the month. Hey? By the everlastin'! I declare if it ain't the fust of June!"

"The day Foster's mortgage falls due," he says, excited. "I wonder. . . . You don't suppose —"

He didn't have to suppose, for inside of the next two minutes we both knew. Three men came bustin' out of the billiard room door. One was Philander himself, the other was Ezra Colcord, the lawyer, and the third was our old shipmate and bosom friend,

Ebenezer Taylor. The old man was fairly frothin' at the mouth.

"You — you —" he sputtered, "you've deceived me. You've lied to me. You led me to think —"

"I don't see as you've got any kick, Mr. Taylor," purrs Philander, smilin'. "You've got your money. What more can you ask?"

"But — but I don't want the money. I want this property, and I'll have it."

"Oh, no, you won't, Mr. Taylor," says Colcord, the lawyer. "This property belongs to Foster now. He's paid your mortgage in full. You have no rights here whatever and I advise you to go before you are arrested for trespassin'."

Well, the old man went, but he was still talkin' and threatenin' when he turned the corner. Colcord laughed and shook hands with Philander.

"Don't mind him, Foster," he says. "He's sore, that's all, but he has no claim whatever. You've paid off your mortgage and the property is yours absolutely. As for the other matter, the papers will be ready for signature this afternoon. Ha, ha! I imagine they won't add to our friend's joy."

"Cal'late not," says Philander, grinnin'. "This'll be his day for surprises, hey?"

They shook hands again and Colcord left. Soon's he'd gone, Jim Henry grabbed me by the arm. He didn't even wait for the lawyer to get out of sight.

"Come on," he says. "This is too good to be true. We must find out about this, Skipper."

So over to the "Parlors" we hurried. Philander looked sort of queer when he saw us comin', but he didn't run away. We commenced to ask questions, both of us together. After we'd asked a dozen or so, he held up his hand.

"Come inside," he says, "and I'll tell you about it. The secret'll be out in a little while, anyhow, and maybe we do owe you fellers a little mite of explanation."

We went in, wonderin'. Philander set up the cigars, ten-centers at that, and then he says:

"Yes, I've paid off my mortgage and I cal'late you wonder where the money came from. Five hundred of it I had myself. You knew that."

"Yes," says Jacobs, and I nodded.

"Um-hm," says he. "Well, I loaned the five hundred to Ratty and he bought the option on Aunt Hannah's buildin' with it."

We fairly jumped off our pins.

"What?" says I.

"*Rat* bought that option?" gasped Jim Henry. "Nonsense! his dad bought it."

"No-o," says Philander, solemn, "'twas Rat that bought it at fust. The whole scheme was his and I give him credit for it. After Mr. Jacobs here had agreed to look at the Watson place, Ratty got

Ed. Holmes to take him over to Wareham in his auto. There he see this nephew of Aunt Hannah's, paid down his five hundred and got the option."

"But that letter I got said —" began Jim Henry, and then he pulled up short. "No," says he, "it said 'Mr. Taylor' had secured the option; I remember now. But, of course, we supposed it was Ebenezer."

"And Ebenezer did have it," I put in. "He told me so himself. I met him on the road and he —"

"Hold on, Cap'n," cuts in Philander, "no use goin' through all that. Ebenezer *has* got it now. Ratty decoyed his dad down abreast the Watson place while you and Mr. Jacobs was inside lookin' it over, and the old man see you two come out."

"I know he did," says I. "I saw him peekin' at us from behind a tree."

"Yes," goes on Foster, "he was there. And, naturally, he jedged you was cal'latin' to buy that buildin' and move into it. Fact is, he'd been intendin' to buy it himself as an investment, and, now that there was a chance to spite you fellers hove in for good measure, he was more anxious to get it than ever. Then Rat broke the news that he had the option and was willin' to sell it to the highest bidder. Ha! ha! I guess there was a lively session, but the upshot of it was that Ebenezer bought

that option off his boy for a thousand dollars. That's how *he* got it."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" says Jim Henry. I was way past sayin' anything.

"And so," continues Philander, "the five hundred dollars' profit on the option and the five hundred dollars I lent Rat to start with made just the amount needful to pay off my mortgage. And, Squire Colcord and me paid it off this mornin'. You fellers heard the concludin' section of the ceremonies. Ebenezer's benediction was some spicy, hey!"

"But — but — why, look here, Philander," says I. "I don't understand this at all. Five hundred of that thousand was Rat's. He ain't no philanthropist; he wouldn't *give* it to you, unless miracles are comin' into fashion again. What —"

Foster laughed. "There is a little somethin' underneath," he says. "It's been kept pretty close, but the cat'll be out of the bag afore the day's over and, considerin' how much you two helped without meanin' to, I'd just as soon tell you. Ratty told you that his pa was cal'latin' to set him up in business, didn't he? Yes. Well, Rat's had a notion for a long spell about the business he meant to get into. There's a new sign been ordered for this shebang of mine. Here's the copy for it."

He reached under the cigar counter and held up a long piece of pasteboard. 'Twas lettered like this:

PALACE BILLIARD, POOL AND SIPIO PARLORS.

PHILANDER FOSTER & ERASTUS TAYLOR,
Proprietors.

"I cal'late the old man'll disown his son when he knows it," goes on Foster, "but Rat had rather run a pool room than be rich, any day in the week. And say," he adds, "if I was you fellers I'd try to be on hand when Ebenezer fust sees the new sign. I should think you'd get consider'ble satisfaction from watchin' his face. I'm cal'latin' to, myself," says Philander Foster.

CHAPTER VI

I RUN AFOUL OF COUSIN LEMUEL

WELL, to be honest, I felt pretty bad about that billiard room business. I was real sorry for old Ebenezer. Of course Taylor was a skinflint and a thorough-goin' mean man, but Ratty was his son and his pride, and to have a son play a dog's trick like that on the father that had, at least, tried to make somethin' out of him, seemed tough enough. And my conscience plagued me. I felt almost as if I was to blame somehow. I wa'n't, of course, but I felt that way. A feller's conscience is the most unreasonable part of his works; I've noticed it often.

But I needn't have wasted any sympathy on Ebenezer. For the fust little while after his boy went into the pool and sipio business, he was a sore chap. Then, all at once, I noticed that he took to hangin' around the " Parlors " consider'ble and one evenin' I saw him comin' out of there, all smiles. I was standin' on the store platform and as he passed me I hailed him. We hadn't spoken for a consider'ble spell, but I hadn't any grudge, for my part.

"Hello!" says I, "what are you so tickled about?"

I didn't know as he wouldn't throw somethin' at me for darin' to hail him, but no, he was ready to talk to anybody, even me.

"No use," says he, "that boy of mine's a mighty smart feller. He just beat Tom Baker three games runnin', and spotted him two balls on the last one. He's a wonder, if I do say it."

I looked at him. This didn't sound much like disinheritin'.

"Three games of what?" says I.

"Why, pool," says he, "of course. And Baker's been countin' himself the best player in the county. 'Rastus was playin' for the house. Him and Philander cleared over a hundred dollars in the last month. That ain't so bad for a young feller just startin' in, is it? I always knew that boy had the business instinct, if he'd only wake up to it. I've told folks so time and again."

He went along, chucklin' to himself, and I stood still and whistled. And when I heard that the old man had taken to callin' the anti-billiard-room crowd bigoted and narrer it didn't surprise me much. I judged that Ebenezer's opinions was like those of others of his tribe — dependent on the profit and loss account in the ledger. You can forgive your own kith and kin a lot easier than you can outsiders,

especially if your moral scruples are the Taylor kind, to be reckoned in dollars and cents.

The carpenters were ready to begin work on our store addition at last, and we started right in to build on. 'Twas an awful job, enough sight worse than movin', but it had to be got through with some way and we wanted to have it finished when the summer season opened for good. If the store had been cluttered up and crowded afore, it was ten times worse now. The amount of energy and healthy remarks that Jacobs and I wasted in fallin' over and runnin' into things would have kept a steamer's engines goin' from Boston to Liverpool, I cal'late. I expected one of us would break our neck sartin sure, but we didn't and, by the fust of July we thought we could see the end.

"There!" says I, "in another week we'll be clear of sawdust, I do believe. The painters won't be so bad. And we've got on without any accidents, too, which is a miracle."

"You ought to knock wood when you say that, Skipper," says Jim Henry.

"I've knocked enough of it already — with my head," I told him. But I hadn't. At any rate the accident come, and not by reason of the buildin' on, either. It come right in the way of everyday trade, from where we wa'n't expectin' it. That's the way such things generally happen. A feller runs under

a tree, so's to keep from gettin' rained on and catchin' cold, and then the tree's struck by lightnin'.

If I'd remembered what old Sylvanus Baxter said when they asked him to prove one of his fish statements, I'd have been a wiser man. Sylvanus was tellin' how many mack'rel him and his brother caught off Setucket P'int with a hand line, back when Methusalum was a child, or about then. Forty-eight barrels they caught, and it nigh filled the dory. One of the young city fellers who was listenin' undertook to doubt the yarn. He got a piece of paper and a pencil and proved that a dory wouldn't hold that many fish. Sylvanus shut him up in a hurry.

"Young man," he says, scornful, "where a human bein' is blessed with a memory same as I've got, proof's too unsartin to compare with it."

If I'd borne in mind what Sylvanus said and abided by it I might not have dropped the barrel of sugar on my starboard foot. I'd have been satisfied to remember my strength and not try to prove it by liftin' the said barrel off the tailboard of our delivery wagon.

However, I did try, and the result was that the barrel slipped when I'd got it 'most to the ground, and my foot went out of commission with a hurrah, so to speak.

Jim Henry come runnin' and him and the clerk loaded me into the wagon and carted me off to my

rooms at the Poquit House. And there I stayed in dry dock for three weeks, while the doctor done his best to patch up my busted trotter and get me off the ways and into active service again.

He done his part all right. I was mendin' so far as the lower end of me was concerned, but my upper works and temper was gettin' more tangled and snarled every day. Too much company was the trouble. I had too many folks runnin' in to ask how I was gettin' on and to talk and talk and talk. Jim Henry he come, of course, to talk about the store; and Mary Blaisdell, to tell me how the post-office was doin'. I could stand them; fact is, Mary was a sort of soothin' sirup, with her pleasant face and calm, cheery voice. But the parson he come, to keep the spiritual part of me ready for whatever might happen; and the undertaker, to be sure he got the other part, if it *did* happen; and twenty-odd old maids and widows from sewin'-circle to talk about each other and church squabbles and the dreadful sufferin's and agonizin' deaths of their relations, who'd had accidents similar to mine.

They made me so fidgety and mad that the doctor noticed it. "What's troublin' you, Cap'n Snow?" he asked. "No new pains, I hope?"

"Humph!" says I. "Your hope's blasted. I've got the meanest pain I've had yet."

"Where?" says he, anxious.

"All over," I says. "Tabitha Nickerson's responsible for it. She's been here for the last hour and a half, tellin' about how her second cousin, by her uncle's marriage, stuck a nail in his hand and was amputated twice and finally died of lingerin' lockjaw. She never missed a groan. Consarn her! *She* gives me a pain just to look at."

He laughed. "That's the trouble with you old bachelors," he says. "You're too popular with the fair sex."

"Fair!" I sung out. "Doc, if you mean to say Tabby Nickerson's fair, then I'm goin' to switch to the homeopaths. *Your* judgment ain't dependable."

He laughed again and then he went on. Seems he'd been thinkin' for quite a spell that the Poquit House wasn't the place for me.

"What you need, Cap'n," he says, "is a nice quiet spot where nobody can get at you — that is, nobody but the disagreeable necessities, like me. I've found the place for you to board durin' your convalescence. Do you know the Deacon house over at South Ostable on the lower road?"

"If you mean Lot Deacon's, I do — yes," says I.

"That's it," says he. "Lot's all alone there, and he'd be mighty glad of a boarder. The house is as neat as wax, and Lot used to go as cook on a Banks' boat, so you'll be fed well. It's right on the shore,

with the woods back of it. There's a splendid view, the air's fine, and — and —"

"Don't strain yourself, Doc," I put in. "You couldn't think of anything else if you thought for a week. Air and view is all there is in that neighborhood. What on earth have I done to be sentenced to serve a term at Lot Deacon's?"

Well, it was quiet, and I needed quiet. It was restful, and I needed rest. It was too far from civilization for the undertaker or the sewin'-circle to get at me. It was — but there! never mind the rest. The upshot was that I agreed to board at Lot's till my foot got well enough to navigate and they carted me down in the delivery wagon, next day.

The Deacon place lived up to specifications all right. Nighest neighbor half a mile off, woods all round on three sides, and the bay on t'other. Good grub and plenty of it. And no company except the doctor every other day, and Jim Henry the days between, and Lot — oh, land, yes! Lot, always and forever.

He was a meek little critter, Lot was, accommodatin' and willin' to please, as good a cook as ever fried a clam, and a great talker on some subjects. He was a widower, with no relations except an aunt-in-law over to Denboro, and a third cousin up to Boston; and his principal hobby was spirits and mediums and such. He was as sot on Spiritu'lism

as anybody ever you see, and hadn't missed a Spirit'-list camp-meetin' in Harniss durin' the memory of man.

However, Lot and I got along first-rate and he'd set and talk by the hour about the camp-meetin', which was a couple of weeks off, and how he was goin', and so on. Said I needn't worry about bein' left alone, 'cause his wife's Aunt Lucindy from Denboro was comin' to keep house for me durin' the two days he was away.

"Is your Aunt Lūcindy given to spirits, too?" I wanted to know.

No, she wasn't. Seems her particular bug was "mind cure." She was a widow whose husband had died of creepin' paralysis. She'd tried every kind of doctorin' and patent medicines on him and, in spite of it, the last specimen of "Swamp Bitters" or "Thistle Tea" finished him. But, anyhow, Aunt Lucindy had no faith in medicines or doctors after that. She'd tried 'em all and they'd gone back on her. Now she was a "mind-curer."

"She'll prob'bly try to cure your foot with mind, Cap'n Zeb," says Lot, apologetic as usual. "But you mustn't worry about that. She means well."

"I sha'n't worry," I says. "She can put her mind on my foot, if she wants to; unless it's as hefty as that sugar barrel I cal'late 'twon't hurt me much. But say, Lot," I says, "are all your folks taken with

something special in the line of religion or cures? How about this cousin — this Lemuel one? What's possessin' *him?"*

Oh, Cousin Lemuel was different. He'd had money left him and was an aristocrat. He never married, but lived in "chambers" up to Boston. He didn't have to work, but was a "collector" for the fun of it; collected postage stamps and folks' hand-writin's and insects and such. He wasn't very well, his nerves was kind of twittery, so Lot said.

"Um-hm," says I. "Well, collectin' insects would make most anybody's nerves twitter, I cal'late. But if Cousin Lemuel likes 'em, I s'pose we hadn't ought to fret. He could pick up a healthy collection of wood-ticks back here in the pines, if he'd only come after 'em, though it ain't likely he will."

But he did, just the same. Not after the ticks, exactly, but, as sure as I'm settin' here, this Cousin Lemuel landed in the house at South Ostable, bag and baggage. 'Twas three days afore the beginnin' of camp-meetin' and two afore Aunt Lucindy was expected over. Lot and me was settin' in rockin' chairs by the front windows in my room lookin' out over the bay, when all to once we heard the rattle of a wagon from the woods abaft the kitchen.

"It's the doctor, I cal'late," says Lot, wakin' up and stretchin'. "Ah, hum, I s'pose I'll have to go down and let him in."

"'Tain't the doctor," says I. "He come yesterday. More likely it's Mr. Jacobs, though I thought he'd gone to Boston and wouldn't be back for three or four days."

But a minute later we see we was mistaken. Around the house come rattlin' Simeon Wixon's old depot wagon, with the curtains all drawed down — though 'twas hot summer — and the rack astern and the seat in front piled up high with trunks and bags and satchels and goodness knows what all. Sim was drivin' and he had a grin on him like a Chessy cat.

"Whoa!" says he, haulin' in the horses. "Ahoy, Lot! Turn out there! Got a passenger for you."

Lot was so surprised he could hardly believe his ears, though they was big enough to be believed. He h'isted up the window screen and looked out.

"Hey?" he says, bewildered-like. "Did you say a *passenger?*"

"That's what I said. A passenger for you. Come on down."

"A passenger? For *me?*"

"Yes! yes! yes!" Simeon's patience was givin' out, and no wonder. "Don't stay up there," he snaps, "with your head stuck out of that window like a poll-parrot's out of a cage. And don't keep sayin' things over and over or I'll believe you *are* a poll-parrot. Come down!" Then, leaning back and hollerin' in behind the carriage curtains, he sung

out, "Hi, mister! here we be. You can get out now."

The curtains shook a little mite and then, from behind 'em, sounded a voice, a man's voice, but kind of shrill and high, and with a quiver in the middle of it.

"Are you sure this is the right place, driver?" it says.

"Sartin sure. This is it."

"But are you certain those animals are perfectly safe? They won't run away?"

The horses was takin' a nap, the two of 'em. Sim grinned, wider'n ever, and winks up at the window.

"I'll do my best to hold 'em," he says. "If I'd known you was comin' I'd have fetched an anchor."

The curtains shook some more, as if the feller inside was fidgetin' with 'em. Then the voice says again and more excited than ever, "Well, why in Heaven's name don't you unfasten this dreadful door? How am I to get out?"

Simeon stood grinnin', ripped a remark loose under his breath, jumped from the seat, and yanked the door open. There was a full half minute afore anything happened. Then out from that wagon door popped a black felt hat with a brim like a small-sized umbrella. Under the hat was a pair of thin, grayish side-whiskers, a long nose, and a pair of specs

like full moons. The hat and the rest of it turned towards the horses and the voice says:

"You're *perfectly* sure of those creatures you are drivin'? Very good. Where is the step? Oh, dear! where is the *step?*"

Sim reached in, grabbed a little foot with one of them things they call a "gaiter" on it, hauled it down and planted it on the step of the carriage.

"There!" he snaps. "There 'tis, underneath you. Come on! Here! I'll unload you."

Maybe the passenger would have said somethin' else, but he didn't have a chance. Afore he could even think he was jerked out of that depot wagon and stood up on the ground.

"There!" says Simeon. "Now you're safe and no bones broken. Where do you want your dunnage; in the house?"

I don't know what answer he got. Afore I could hear it there was a gasp and a gurgle from Lot. I turned to him. He was leaning out of the window starin' down at the little man under the big hat.

"I believe—" he says, "I—I—*why,* it's Cousin Lemuel!"

Cousin Lemuel looked around him, at the house, at the woods, at the bay, at everything.

"Good heavens!" says he, in a sort of groan.—"Good heavens! what an awful place!"

That's how he made port and that was his first

observation after landin'. He made consider'ble many more durin' the next few days, but the drift of 'em was all similar. He was a bird, Cousin Lemuel was. His twittery nerves had twittered so much durin' the past month or so that his doctors — he had seven or eight of 'em — had got tired of the chirrup, I cal'late, had held officers' counsel, and decided he must be got rid of somehow. They couldn't kill him, 'cause that was against the law, so they done the next best and ordered him to the seashore for a complete rest; at least, he said the rest was to be for him, but I judge 'twas the doctors that needed it most. He wouldn't go to a hotel — hotels were horrible,— but he happened to think of relation Lot down in South Ostable and headed for there. Whether or not Lot could take him in, or wanted to, didn't trouble him a mite! *He* wanted to come and that was sufficient! He never even took the trouble to write that he was comin'. When he once made up his mind to do a thing, and got sot on it, he was like the laws of the Medes and Possums — or whatever they was — in Scripture; you couldn't upset him in two thousand years. It got to be a "matter of principle" with him — he was always tellin' about his matters of principle — and when the "principle" complication struck, that settled it. Oh, Cousin Lemuel was a bird, just as I said.

And Lot, of course, didn't have gumption enough

to say he wasn't welcome. No, indeed; fact is, Lot seemed to consider his comin' a sort of honor, as you might say. If that retired bug-collector had been the Queen of Sheba, he couldn't have had more fuss made over him. The schooner-load of trunks and satchels was carted aloft to the big room next to mine,— Lot's room 'twas, but Lot soared to the attic,— and Cousin Lemuel was carted there likewise. He was introduced to me, and about the first thing he said was, would I mind wearin' a dressin'-robe, or a bath-sack, or somethin' to cover up my game foot? the sight of the dreadful bandage affected his nerves. I was sort of shy on sacks and dolmans and such, but I done my best to please him with a patchwork comforter.

I can't begin to tell you the things he did, or had Lot do for him. Changin' the feather bed for a pumped-up air mattress he'd fetched along — air mattresses was a matter of principle with him — and firin' the rag mats off the floor of his room, 'cause the round-and-round braids made whirligigs in his head — and so on. But I sha'n't forget that first night in a hurry.

He was in and out of my room no less than fifteen times, rigged out in some sort of blanket dress, fastened with a rope amidships. He wore that over his nightgown, and a shawl like an old woman's on top of the blanket. His head was tied up in a silk

handkerchief; and his feet was shoved into slippers that flapped up and down when he walked and sounded like a slack jib in a light breeze. First off he couldn't sleep 'cause the frogs hollered. Next, 'twas the surf that troubled him. Then the window blinds creaked. And, at last, I'm blessed if he didn't come flappin' and rustlin' in at half-past one to ask what made it so quiet. I was desp'rate, and I told him I was subject to nightmare, and had been known to cripple folks that come in and woke me sudden that way. He cleared out and I heard him pilin' chairs and furniture against his door on the inside. After that I managed to sleep till six o'clock. Then he knocked and asked if I was thoroughly awake, 'cause if I was would I tell him what sort of weather 'twas likely to be, so's he could dress accordin'. His risin' hour was nine,— more principle, of course,— but he liked to know what to wear when he did get up.

And he was just as bad all that day and the next. I'd have quit and had the doctor take me back to the Poquit House, but I didn't like to on Lot's account. Poor Lot was all upset and needed some sane person to turn to for comfort. And besides, although he made me mad, I got consider'ble fun out of this Lemuel man's doin's. He was such a specimen that I liked to study him, same as he used to study a new species of insect, when he had that particular craze.

He seemed to like me, too, in a way. Anyhow he used to come in and talk to me pretty frequent. He had three words that he used all the time — "awful" and "dreadful" and "horrible." Everything in the neighborhood fitted to them words, 'cordin' to his notion. And he had one question that he kept askin' over and over: What should he do? What was there to do in the dreadful place?

"Why don't you keep on collectin'?" I asked him. "We're kind of scurce on postage stamps, and the handwritin' supply is limited; though you never collected anything like Lot's signature, I'll bet a cooky. But there's bugs enough, land knows! Why don't you go bug-huntin'?"

Oh, he was tired of insects. Never wanted to see one again!

"Then you'll have to wear blinders when you go past the salt-marsh," says I. "The moskeeters are so thick there they get in your eyes. Why not take a swim?"

Horrible! he loathed salt-water. He never bathed in it, as a matter of —

I interrupted quick —"Then take a walk," says I.

Walking was a "bore."

"Well then," I says, "just do what the doctor ordered — set and rest."

But settin' made his nerves worse than ever! "I don't know what is the matter with me, Cap'n Snow,"

he says. "My physicians seemed to think I should find what I needed here, but I don't! — I don't! I am more depressed and enervated than ever."

"I know what you need," I said emphatic.

"Do you indeed? What, pray?"

"Somethin' to keep you interested," I told him. "Your life's like a wharf timber that the worms have been at — there's too many 'bores' in it. If you could find somethin' bran-new to interest you, you'd be lively enough. I'd risk the depression then — and the enervation, too, whatever that is."

Oh, horrible! How could I joke about a matter of life and death?

Well, so it went for the two days and in the evenin' of the second day, Lot come tiptoein' into my room. He was all nerved up. The next mornin' was the time he'd planned to go to camp-meetin'; and how could he go now?

"Why not?" says I. "I'll be all right. Your Aunt Lucindy's comin' to keep house, ain't she?"

"Yes — yes, she's comin'. But how can I leave Cousin Lemuel? He won't want me to go, I'm sure."

"So'm I," I says; "he'll kick as a matter of principle. But if you're gone afore he knows it, he'll *have* to like it — or lump it, one or t'other. See here, Lot Deacon; you take my advice and clear out to-morrow early, afore the bug-hunter's nerves twit-

ter loud enough to wake him. You can get our breakfast and leave it on the table out here in the hall. I can manage to hobble that far. Afore dinner Aunt Lucindy'll be on deck."

He brightened up consider'ble. "I might do that," he says. "And anyway Aunt Lucindy's likely to be here afore breakfast. She's always terrible prompt. But will Cousin Lemuel forgive me, do you think?"

"I don't know," says I. "But I will, provided you don't say 'terrible' again. Now clear out and don't let me see you till camp-meetin's over. And say," I called after him, "just ask one of your spirit chums what's good for nerve twitters."

Next mornin' was sort of dark and cloudy, so probably that accounts for my oversleepin'. Anyhow 'twas after seven o'clock when Cousin Lemuel, blanket and shawl and slippers, full undress uniform, comes flappin' into my room. I woke up and stared at him. He was pale, and tremblin' all over.

"What's the matter now?" says I.

"Hush!" he whispers, fearful. "Hush! somethin' awful has happened. My cousin Lot is insane."

"*What?*" I sung out, settin' up in bed.

"Hush! hush!" says he. "It is horrible. Insanity is hereditary in our family. What shall we do?"

"Insane — rubbish!" says I, havin' waked up a little more by this time. "What makes you think he's insane?"

He held up a shakin' hand. "Listen!" he whispers. "He has been makin' dreadful noises for the past half-hour, and singin'— actually singin'— in the strangest voice. Listen!"

I listened. Down below in the kitchen there was a racket of pans and dishes and a stompin' as if a menagerie elephant had broke loose from its moorin's. Then somebody busts out singin', loud and high:

> "There's a land that is fairer than day,
> And by faith we can see it afar."

"There, there!" says Lemuel. "Don't you hear it? Would a sane man sing like that?"

I rocked back and forth in bed and roared and laughed. "A sane man wouldn't," I says, "but a sane *woman* might, if she had strong enough lungs. That ain't Lot. Lot's gone to camp-meetin', to be gone till to-morrow night. That's his wife's aunt, Lucindy Hammond, from Denboro. She's goin' to keep house for us till he gets back."

CHAPTER VII

THE FORCE AND THE OBJECT

WELL, it took all of fifteen minutes for me to drive the idea out of that critter's head that his relative had gone loony. I was hoppin' around on my sound foot tryin' to dress, while I explained things. I had enough clothes on to be presentable in white folks' society, when there come a whoop up the back stairs.

"Good morn-in'!" whoops Aunt Lucindy. "Breakfast is ready! Shall I fetch it up?"

"My soul!" squeals Cousin Lemuel, and bolts for his own room. I buttoned my collar by main strength and answered the hail.

"All hands on deck!" I sung out. "Fetch her along."

There was a mighty stompin' on the stairs, and then through the door marches as big a woman as ever I see in my born days. 'Twa'n't only that she was fleshy,— she must have weighed all of two hundred and thirty,— but she was big, big as a small mountain, seemed so, and was dressed in some sort of curtain-calico gown that made her look bigger

yet. She was luggin' a tray heaped up with vittles enough for a small ship's company.

"Good mornin'," says she, in a voice as big as the rest of her, and as che ry as the fust sunshine on a foggy day. She was smilin' all over, but there was a square look to her chin — the upper one, for she had no less than two and a half — that made me think she could be the other thing if occasion called for. "Good mornin'," says she. "Is this Lemuel?"

"It ain't," says I. "Cousin Lemuel is in disability just at present. My name's Snow."

"Oh, yes!" she hollers — every time she spoke she hollered — "Oh, yes! Cap'n Zebulon Snow, of course. I'm Mrs. Hammond. Here's your breakfast."

"Mine!" says I, lookin' at the heap of rations. "You mean mine and Cousin Lemuel's."

"Oh, no, I don't," says she, still smilin', and puttin' the tray down on the table, in the way she did everything, with a bang; "I mean yours, Cap'n Snow. Lemuel's is all ready, though, and I'll fetch it right up. I know what men's appetites are; I've had experience."

Afore I could think of an answer to this she swept out of the door like a toy typhoon, the breeze from her skirts settin' papers and light stuff flyin', and was stompin' down the stairs, singin' "Sweet By and

By" at the top of her lungs. I looked at the tray and scratched my head. My appetite ain't a hummin'-bird's, by a consider'ble sight, but that breakfast would have lasted me all day. As for Lemuel, about all he did with food was find fault with it. And just then in he comes.

"What's that?" says he, pointin' to the tray.

"That?" says I. "That's my breakfast. Yours is just like it and it'll be right up."

He fidgeted with his specs and bent over to look. His nose was anything but a pug, but I give you my word you could almost see it turn up.

"Fried potatoes!" he says; "and fried fish! and fried eggs! and griddle-cakes! Why — why it's *all* fried! Horrible!"

"Ain't there enough?" I asks, sarcastic. "If not, I presume likely there's more in the kitchen."

"Enough!" he fairly screamed it. "I never take anything but a slice of very dry toast and a cup of tea in the mornin'. It's a principle of mine. And I never eat anything fried! I — I —"

"All right," says I, "you tell her so. Here she is." And afore he could get out of the door she sailed through it, luggin' another tray loaded like the fust one. She slammed it down and turned to the invalid, who was tryin' to hide his blanket dressin'-sack behind a chair.

"Here is Lemuel!" she hollers. "It *is* Lemuel

isn't it? I'm *so* glad to see you! I'm Lucindy, Lot's auntie. In a way we're related, so we must shake hands."

She reached over and took his little thin hand in her big one and gave it a squeeze that made him curl up like a fishin' worm.

"There!" says she, "now we're all acquainted and sociable. Ain't that nice! You two set right down and eat. I'll trot up again in a few minutes to see how you're gettin' on. Sure you've got all you want? All right, then." Out she went, singin' away, and Cousin Lemuel flopped down in a chair.

"Good heavens!" he gasps, working the fingers Aunt Lucindy had shook, to make sure they was all there. "Good heavens!" says he.

"Yes," says I, "I agree with you."

"She calls me by my Christian name!" he says, pantin', "and I never saw her before in my life! And it — it didn't seem to occur to her that I was not fully dressed. What shall I do?"

"Well," says I, "if you asked me I should say you better make believe eat somethin'. What *I* can't eat I'm goin' to heave out of the back window. I'd ruther satisfy that woman than explain to her, enough sight."

But he wouldn't eat, seemed to be in a sort of daze, as you might say, and went flappin' back to his own room. I tackled the breakfast.

It would take a week to tell you all that happened that forenoon. My time's limited, so I'll only tell a little of it. When Aunt Lucindy come up-stairs again and see his tray, not a thing on it touched, she wanted to know why. I done my best to explain, tellin' her Cousin Lemuel was afflicted in the nerves, and about his tea and toast, and his diff'rent kinds of medicines, and his doctors, and so on, but she wouldn't listen to more'n half of it.

"The poor thing!" she says, "Lot told me some about him. He's in error, ain't he. Horatio, my husband that was, was in error, too, but he died of it. That was afore I got enlightened. And you're in error with your foot, Cap'n Snow, so Lot says. Well, it's a mercy I'm here. The first thing I'll do for you is to give you a cheerful thought. 'All's right in the world.' You keep thinkin' that this forenoon and I'll give you another after dinner. I must get a thought for poor Lemuel, but he needs a stronger one. I'll have one ready for him pretty soon. Now I must do my dishes."

Soon's she cleared out this time I locked my door. An hour or so later there was a snappish kind of knock on it.

"Cap'n Snow! I say, Cap'n Snow," whispers Lemuel, pretty average testy, "where is my tea and toast? Did you tell that woman about my tea and toast? I'm hungry."

"I told her," says I. "If you ain't got it, you better tell her yourself."

"But I don't want to see the creature," he says.

"Neither do I; that is, I ain't partic'lar about it. And I couldn't hop down-stairs if I was. You'll have to do your own tellin'. I'm goin' to read a spell."

My readin' didn't amount to much. He went grumblin' back to his room, but I judge his longin' for tea and toast got the better of his dread for the "creature," 'cause pretty soon I heard him go down-stairs. Aunt Lucindy's singin' and dish-clatterin' stopped, and I heard consider'ble pow-wow goin' on. Cousin Lemuel's voice kept gettin' higher and shriller, but Aunt Lucindy's was just the same even cheerfulness all the time. Then the ex-insect man comes up the stairs again. I was curious, so I unlocked the door.

"How was the toast?" I asked. His usual pale face was bright red and he was a heap more energetic than I'd ever seen him.

"She — she — that woman's crazy!" he sputters. "She's insane; I told her so. I —"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "Did you get the toast?"

"I did not. She refused to give it to me. Actually refused! She — she had that dreadful fried breakfast on the back of the stove and told me to

sit right down and eat it — like a good fellow. A good fellow — to me! — as if I was a dog! A dog, by Jove! I explained — in spite of my just resentment I endeavored to reason with her. I told her the doctor had forbidden my eatin' a heavy breakfast. I said that my nerves were shattered and so on. And what do you suppose she said to me? She had the brazen effrontery to tell me that I had no nerves. Nerves were 'errors,' whatever that means. All I had to do was to think that — that those fried outrages were all right and they would be. And when I — you'll admit I had a good reason — when I lost my temper and expressed my opinion of her she began to sing. And she kept on singin'. *Such* singin'! Good heavens! Horrible!"

"Then you ain't had any breakfast?"

"I have not. But I will have it! I will! You mark my words, I —"

He stopped. "The Sweet By and By" had swung into the lower entry and was movin' up the stairs. I expected to see Cousin Lemuel beat for snug harbor, but no sir-ee! he stayed right where he was, settin' up in his chair as straight as a ramrod. Aunt Lucindy's treatment might not be workin' exactly as she intended, the patient's nerves might not be any better, but his *nerve* was improvin' fast.

In she swept, smilin' like clockwork, as smooth and as serene as a flat calm in Ostable cove. She paid no attention to the way the little man glared at her, but turned to me and says: "Well, Cap'n," she says, "have you cherished the thought I gave you?"

"Um-hm," says I, "I've put it on ice. I cal'late 'twill keep over Sunday."

"I've thought up one for you, Lemuel, you poor thing," she says, turnin' to the insect chaser. "It is —"

"Woman," broke in Cousin Lemuel, "I'll trouble you not to call me a poor thing. Where is my tea and toast?"

She smiled at him, condescendin' but pitiful, same as a cow might smile at a kitten that tried to scratch it — if a cow could smile.

"Your breakfast is on the stove, all nice and warm," she says. "You don't really want tea and toast; you only think so. Cap'n Snow will tell you how nice those fried potatoes are, and the codfish and —"

"Confound your codfish, madam! I shall have that tea and toast. I — I *must* have it. My system demands it."

She shook her head. "Oh, no, it doesn't," says she. "It will demand all the nice things I've cooked for you if you only think so. Thought is all. Now

let me give you your cheerful thought for the day. It is —"

"Confound your thoughts!" yells the nerve sufferer, jumpin' out of his chair and makin' for the door. "I always have tea and toast for breakfast, and I intend to have it now."

I hate a fuss, so I tried to pour a little ile on the troubled waters. "Now, Lemuel," says I, "don't let's be stubborn. You —"

He whirled on me like a teetotum. "Stubborn!" he snaps, "I was never stubborn in my life. This is a matter of principle with me. That woman shall give me my tea and toast."

Aunt Lucindy smiled, same as ever. "Oh, no, I sha'n't," says she, "it would only encourage you in your error and that I shall not permit. Please listen to the thought I have for you. It is *such* a nice one. 'Be true to your higher self and'—"

"Madam," shrieks Lemuel, "my thought about you is that you're an old fat fool! There!" And he rushed into the hall and the next second his door slammed so it shook the house.

For just one minute I thought Aunt Lucindy was goin' after him. Her smile stopped, her teeth snapped together, she took one step towards the door, and her big hands opened and shut. But that one step was all she took. When she turned back to me her face was red, but the smile had got busy

once more. She set down in the cane rocker — it cracked, but it held — and says she:

"He's a little mite antagonistic, don't you think so, Cap'n Snow?"

"Well," says I, "I should think you might call it that without exaggeratin' much."

"Yes," says she, "but I don't mind. There was a time when if anybody'd called me an old fat fool I'd have — well, never mind. I'm above such things now. Nothin' can make me cross any more. Not even a sassy little, long-nosed shrimp like . . . Ahem. Cap'n Snow, have you read 'The Soarin' of Self'? It's a lovely book, an upliftin' book."

I said I hadn't read it and she commenced to tell me about it, repeatin' it by chapters, so to speak. I couldn't make much out of it but a whirligig of words, and when she was just beginnin' I thought I heard Lemuel's door creak. However, I didn't hear anything more, and she strung along and strung along, about "soul" and "mental uplift" and "high altitude of spirit" and a lot more. By and by I commenced to sniff.

"Excuse me, marm," I says, "but seems to me I smell somethin' burnin'. Have you got anything on cookin'?"

She sniffed then. "No," says she, wonderin'. "I can't remember anything." Then, with another

sniff, "But seems as if I smelt it, too. Like — like bread burnin'. Hey? You don't s'pose —"

She put for down-stairs. Next thing I knew there was the greatest hullabaloo below decks that you ever heard. Then up the stairs comes Cousin Lemuel, two steps at a jump, which, considerin' that his usual gait had been a crawl, was surprisin' enough of itself. He had a scorched slice of bread in each hand and he stopped on the upper landin' and waved 'em.

"I've got the toast," he yells, triumphant, "and I'm goin' to have the tea." Then he bolts into his room and locked the door.

Up the stairs comes Aunt Lucindy. Her face was so red that it looked as if somebody'd lit a fire inside it, and her big hands was shut tight. She marched straight to that locked door and hollers through the keyhole.

"You — you little, dried-up critter!" she pants. "Humph! I s'pose you've been sent to try my faith, but you sha'n't shake it. No, sir! you nor nobody else can shake it or make me lose my temper. I'm perfectly calm and cheerful this minute. I am! Ha, ha! Ha, ha!"

"I got my toast," hollers Cousin Lemuel from inside. "And I'll have my tea, in spite of all the New Thought cranks in this horrible hole!"

"Indeed you won't. I was prepared for a diffi-

cult case when I came here. Cousin Lot told me about your foolish 'nerves' and all the other errors your selfishness has brought onto you. I made up my mind to set you in the right path and I'm goin' to do it."

"I'll have that tea."

"No, you sha'n't. When folks are in error I never give in to 'em. That's my principle and I stick to it."

When she said "principle" I pretty nigh fell over. If *she'd* got the "principle" disease the case was desperate. Anyhow, I thought 'twas about time for somebody with a teaspoonful of common sense to take a hand.

"See here," says I, "for grown-up folks this is the most ridiculous doin's I ever heard of. Mrs. Hammond, for the land sakes let him have his tea and maybe we'll have peace along with it."

She turned to me. "Cap'n Snow," she says, "speakin' as one who has learned to rise above their baser self, and perfectly calm and good-tempered, I advise you to mind your own business. I don't care nothin' about the tea itself; it's the principle I'm strivin' for, I tell you. Do you s'pose I'll let that little withered-up, sassy, benighted scoffer —"

"There! there!" says I. Then I bent down to the keyhole. "Lemuel," I says, "be a man and not prize inmate in a feeble-minded home. You're not

an idiot. Apologize to this lady and, if you can't get tea, take hot water."

The answer I got was hotter than any water he was likely to get, enough sight. And there was some "principle" in it, too.

"Well," says I, disgusted, "I'm durn glad that I'm unprincipled. Fight it out amongst yourselves, but don't you either of you dare come nigh me. I mean that." And I went into my room and locked *that* door.

For two hours I stayed there, readin' some and thinkin' a whole lot more. Down-stairs Aunt Lucindy was singin' at the top of her lungs — to show how good her temper was, I presume likely — and out in the upper hall Cousin Lemuel was tiptoein' back and forth and yellin' at her that he'd have his tea in spite of her, and passin' comments on her music. I never knew two such stubborn critters in my life, and I couldn't see any signs of either of 'em givin' in, long as their principles held out.

I remembered a conundrum that, when I was a young one in school, the teacher used to spring on the big boys in the first class in arithmetic. 'Twas somethin' like this:

"If an irresistible force runs afoul of an immovable object, what's the result?"

The boys used to grin and say they didn't know. Neither did I — then; but I was learnin' the answer

that very minute. When an irresistible force meets an immovable object it's a matter of principle, and the result is liable to be 'most anything. That was the answer, and I was learnin' it by observation and experience, same as the barefooted boy learned where the snappin'-turtle's mouth was.

Now the force and the object was in the same house with me, and the minute the doctor, or Jim Henry Jacobs, or anybody else with a horse and team, come to that house, they could take me away with 'em. I'd contracted for quiet and rest, not for a session in Bedlam.

Twelve o'clock struck and I begun to think of dinner. I hobbled over to my door, unlocked it and looked out. Cousin Lemuel's door was open, too, but he wasn't in his room or in the hall either. I wondered where on earth he could be. Next minute I found out.

There was a whoop from the kitchen — Lemuel's voice and brimmin' with pure joy. Then, somewhere in the same neighborhood, began a most tremendous thumpin' and bangin'. A "cast" horse in a narrow stall was the only sounds I ever heard that compared with it. It kept on and kept on, and Lemuel was whoopin' and hurrahin' accompaniments. Such a racket you never heard in your born days.

Thinks I, "The critter's nerves have gone back

on him for good. He's really crazy and he's killin' that poor mind-curer out of principle."

Somehow or other I hopped down them stairs on my sound foot, draggin' t'other after me. Through the dinin'-room I hobbled and into the kitchen. There was a roarin' fire in the cookstove and in front of that stove was Cousin Lemuel dancin' round with a teapot in his hand. The cellar door opened out of the kitchen. It was shut tight, and somebody behind it was bangin' the panels till I expected every second to see-'em go by the board. If they hadn't been built in the days when they made things solid they would have.

"What in the world—" I commenced. "You—Lemuel—whatever your name is—what are you doin'?"

He turned and saw me. His bald head was all shinin' with the heat, his big round specs was almost droppin' off the end of his long nose, and he sartin did look like somethin' the cat brought in.

"What am I doin'?" he says. "Can't you see? I'm gettin' my tea, same as I said I would. Ho! ho!"

"Where's Aunt Lucinda?" I sung out. "You loon, have you killed her?"

He laughed. "No, no!" he says. "She deserves to be killed, but she's alive. She refused to give me my tea; she refused to stop her horrible

singin'. She was utterly impossible and I got rid of her. I crept down and watched until she went into the cellar. Then I closed the door and locked it. Cap'n Snow, I have never been treated as that woman treated me in my life! It was a matter of principle with me and I was obliged —"

He couldn't say any more because the poundin' on the door broke out again louder than ever. I headed for it and he got in front of me.

"She is absolutely unharmed, I assure you," he says.

She sounded healthy, that was a fact. The names she called that insect-hunter was a caution!

"Let me out!" she kept hollerin'. "You let me out of this cellar, you miserable little good-for-nothin'! If I ever get my hands on you I'll —"

"Ha! ha!" laughs Lemuel. "I couldn't make her lose her temper, could I? Oh, no, she's perfectly calm now! You're not in the cellar, madam," he calls to her, "you're in error. Thought can do anything; think yourself out."

I looked at him. "Well," says I, "for a person with twitterin' nerves, you —"

"D—n my nerves!" says he, which was the most human remark he'd ever made in my hearin' and proved that he wasn't beyond hopes. "You told me that all I needed was somethin' to keep me interested. Well, I've got it."

"You let me out!" whoops Aunt Lucindy. "Cap'n Snow, if you're there, you let me out!"

I think maybe I would have let her out, but when I heard what she intended doin' to Lemuel I thought 'twas too big a risk. I turned and hobbled through the dinin'-room to the front outside door. And there, just turnin' into the yard, was Jim Henry Jacobs, with his horse and buggy. When he saw me he almost fell off the seat. And maybe I wa'n't glad to see him!

"You!" he says. "You! *walkin'!*"

"Yes," says I, "and in five minutes I'd have been flyin', I cal'late. Don't stop to talk. Help me into that buggy. . . . There! drive home as fast as you can!"

"But what under the canopy is the row?" he says.

"Row enough," says I. "I've been shut up along with an irresistible force and an immovable object, and I want to get away from 'em. Git dap."

We turned the horse's head. We had just left the yard when he looked back. I looked, too. The cellar had an outside entrance, a bulkhead door. This door was bendin' and heavin' as if an earthquake was under it. Next minute the staple flew, the door slammed back, and Aunt Lucindy popped out like a jack-in-the-box. She never paid no attention to us, but made for the kitchen.

"Who — what is that?" gasps Jacobs.

"That," says I, "is the irresistible force."

There was a yell from the kitchen and then out of the door flew Cousin Lemuel. *He* didn't stop for us, either, but ran like a lamplighter to the fence, fell over it, and dove head-fust into the woods. After he was away out of sight we could hear the bushes crackin'.

"And — and *what,*" gasps Jim Henry, "was *that?*"

"That," says I, "was the immovable object. Drive on, for mercy sakes!"

Next day Lot came to see me at the Poquit House. He was dreadful upset. Seems he hadn't stayed his time out at camp-meetin'. One of the mediums or spooks or somethin' over there told him there was a destructive influence hoverin' over his house and he'd hurried back to find out about it.

"Humph!" says I. "I should have said it had quit hoverin' and had lit. How's Cousin Lemuel?"

Seems Cousin Lemuel was at the hotel over to Bayport. He'd telephoned for his trunks.

"And he told me," says Lot, wonderin' like, "to tell Aunt Lucindy that he intended havin' tea and toast three times a day now, as a matter of principle. That's strange, isn't it?"

"Not to me 'tain't," says I. "And how's Aunt Lucindy?"

"Aunt Lucindy's gone back to Denboro," he says. "And she left word for Cousin Lemuel that she should send him a 'thought'— whatever that is — every day by mail from now on. And you'd ought to have seen her face when she said it! But, Cap'n Zeb, when are you comin' back to board with me?"

I shook my head. "Lot," says I, "I like you fust-rate, but your relations are too irresistibly immovable. I'm goin' to keep clear of 'em for the rest of my life — as a matter of principle," I says, chucklin'.

CHAPTER VIII

ARMENIANS AND INJUNS; LIKEWISE BY-PRODUCTS

YOU can imagine that Jim Henry and Mary had a good deal of fun over my experience with Lot and his tribe. They joked me about it consider'ble. But I didn't mind. My foot was all right again, or nearly so, and the extension to the store had been finished and was workin' out fine. We moved the mail room way back and that give us lots of room on the main floor, and Mary had a nice clean place, with plenty of air and light, new sortin' table, new desks, and all that. As for business, we done more that summer than we had previous and it kept up surprisin' well through the winter. I was happy and satisfied and Jacobs seemed to be.

But he wa'n't. It took a whole lot to satisfy him and, by the time another spring reached us and the cottages begun to open I could see that he was gettin' fidgety. One mornin' he come back from a cruise amongst the cottagers — he always handled their trade himself — and I could see that he was about ready to bile over.

"Well," says I, "what's weighin' on your mind now? Or is it your stomach? I'm willin' to bet that I'm two pound heftier than I was afore I ate them hot biscuits at our boardin' house this mornin'; and you got away with three more'n I did. Has your ballast shifted, or what?"

He shook his head.

"Skipper," says he, "we're ruined by foreign cheap labor."

"You're right," says I. "I heard that that Dutch cook used to work in a cement factory, and them biscuits prove it."

"Nothin' doin'," he says. "My noon lunch for two years was 'Draw one with a plate of sinkers'; and when it comes to warm dough, I'm an immune. That Poquit House cook could practice on me for a week and never dent my nickel-steel digestion. No. What I'm full of just now is embroidery."

I looked at him.

"See here, Jim Henry," says I, "you've got me a mile offshore in a fog. Unless you've swallowed your napkin, I don't see —"

"There! There!" he interrupted. "It's nothin' I've swallowed, I tell you! It's somethin' I've seen that I *can't* swallow. I can't swallow those tan-faced, hook-nosed lace peddlers. It's only spring, yet they are thicker round here already than lumps of saleratus in those biscuit we've been talkin' about.

They're separatin' perfectly good easy marks from money that belongs to us, and I'm gettin' mad. My Turkish blood's risin', and there's likely to be another Armenian massacre in this neighborhood pretty soon."

I understood what he meant then. Every summer for the last year or two the Cape has been sufferin' from a plague of fellers peddlin' handmade lace, and embroidery, and such. They're all shades of color except white, and they talk all sorts of languages except plain United States; but, no matter what they look like or how they jabber, every last one of them claims to be an Armenian, and to have his hand satchel solid full of native-made tidies, and tablecloths, and the like of that. I never run across the Armenian flag on any of my v'yages, but if it ain't a doily, then it ought to be.

And the prices they charge! Whew! A white man would blush every time he named one; but these fellers, bein' all complexions, from light tan Oxford to dark rubber boot, are born to blush unseen, and can charge four dollars for a crocheted necktie and never crack, spot, nor fade.

Jim Henry was some on high prices himself; likewise, he considered the summer cottagers and the hotel folks as more or less our special property. Therefore, you can understand how this Armenian competition riled and disturbed him. And, as it

turned out, that very mornin' he'd gone to call on Mrs. Burke Smythe, who was one of the Ostable Store's best and most well-off customers, and found her ankle-deep in lamp mats and centerpieces which an Armenian specimen was diggin' out of a couple of suit cases. And she'd told him that she couldn't pay our bill for another month 'count of havin' spent all her "household allowance" on the "loveliest set of embroidered dress and waist patterns" and such that ever was. There was the dress pattern. Didn't he think it was a "dear"?

Well, Jim Henry give in to the "dear" part — she'd paid sixty-four dollars for it — and come away disgusted. These peddlers was takin' the coin right out of our mouths, he vowed. What was we goin' to do about it?

"Keep our mouths shut, I guess," says I. "I can't see anything else."

But that wouldn't do for him. He went away growlin', and for the next couple of days he hardly said a word. I knew he was hatchin' some scheme or other, and I took care not to scare him off the nest. The third mornin', he came off himself, fetchin' his brood with him.

"Skipper," says he, joyful, "I believe I've got it. I believe I've got the idea that'll put those Armenians in the discard. You listen to me."

I listened, and what he'd hatched was somethin'

like this: We — that is, the "Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes, and Fancy Goods Store"— would sell embroidery and crocheted plunder, and run the peddlers out of business. We'd open a tidy department on our own hook. What did I think of that?

Well, I didn't think much of it, and I told him so.

"Don't believe we can do it," says I.

"Why not?" says he. "We can charge as much as they can, and that seems to be the main thing."

"That ain't it," I told him. "We can't get the stuff to sell. Plenty of machine made, but the summer folks won't have that, cheap or high. What they wake up nights and cry for is the genuine, hand-manufactured article; and, unless you buy it off the peddlers themselves — which would be unprofitable, to say the least — *I* don't see where you're goin' to get it. Besides, if you could get it, sellin' it in a store wouldn't do. 'Tain't romantic and foolish enough. Take this Burke Smythe woman," says I; "she's a fair sample. She could have got just as nice, pretty dress patterns out of a fashion magazine, for —"

"Great snakes!" he broke in. "You don't think 'twas a *paper* pattern she paid sixty-four dollars for, do you?"

"Never mind what 'twas," I says, dignified; "'twould be all the same, paper or sheet iron. She

wouldn't care for it at all if she'd bought it in a store. There's nothin' mysterious or romantic in that. But here comes one of these liver-complected, black-haired fellers, lookin' for all the world like a pirate, and whispers in her ear he's got somethin' in that carpetbag of his that nobody else has got, and that'll make Mrs. General Jupiter Jones, or some other of the Smythe bosom friends, look like a last summer's scarecrow. And, as a favor to her, he ain't showed it to Mrs. Jupiter — which is most likely a lie, but never mind — and he'll sell it to her at a sixty-four-dollar sacrifice, because —"

"Hold on!" he interrupts. "Cut it out! Break away! Don't you s'pose I've thought of that? Your old Uncle James Henry Jacobs, doctor of sick businesses, wa'n't born yesterday by about thirty-eight years. I ain't figgerin' to handle Armenian stuff. See here, Skipper. What makes the summer bunch so crazy to get hold of old clocks, and old chains, and antique junk generally?"

"Well," says I, "for one thing, 'cause they *are* antiques. For another, because they come from right here on the Cape, and —"

"That's it," he sings out. "And that's enough. Well, there's plenty of handmade embroideries and laces, not to mention lamp mats and bed quilts, made right here on the Cape, too. Last fall, the county fair had a buildin' solid full of 'em. This is my

plan. Do stop your Doubtin' Thomas act, and listen."

The plan was sort of simple but complicated. Fust off, him and me was to see all the old ladies and young girls in Ostable and the surroundin' country, and get 'em to agree to sell their hand-made knittin' to us. If they wouldn't sell to us direct, then we'd sell it for them on commission. We'd fit up a room in the loft over the store, advertise it as the "Colonial Curio Shop" or the "Pilgrim Mothers' Exchange," or some such ridiculous or mysterious name, stock it full of the truck the widows and orphans had been knittin' or tattin' all winter, drop a hint to the summer folks — and then set back and take the money.

"It'll go, I tell you," he says, enthusiastic. "It's a sure winner. Just say the word, Skipper, and we'll start fittin' up the loft to-morrow mornin'."

"Well," says I, pretty doubtful, "if you're so sure, Jim, I —"

"Sure!" he broke in. "Why wouldn't I be sure? There's only one kind of people that can get ahead of me in a business deal — and they don't hail from Armenia. Skipper, here's where we hand our peddlin' friends theirs, and then some."

Next mornin' he took the spare horse and started out. When he got back that night, he had the bottom of the wagon covered with bundles of knittin'

and handmade contraptions, and he made proclamations that he hadn't begun to cover the available territory. He'd seen I don't know how many single females and widows who had the fancywork and crochetin' habit; and they sold him everything they had in stock, and promised more.

"They take to it like a duck to water," says he, joyful. "They're all down on the peddlers, and they're goin' to pitch in and supply the home market. In another week you can't pass two houses in this town without hearin' the merry click of the needle. To-morrow I canvass Denboro and Bayport, and the next day I tackle Harniss. By Monday we'll be ready to fit up the loft."

And, sure enough, he was right. The amount of stuff he fetched back in that wagon was surprisin'. How the female population of Ostable County could have turned out all that embroidery and found time to cook meals and sweep, let alone make calls and talk about their neighbors, beat me a mile. But when he told me what he paid for the collection I begun to understand. However, I didn't say nothin'. 'Twa'n't until he commenced to rig up the room over the store that I spoke my thoughts.

"Why, Jim Henry!" I says. "What are you thinkin' of? Puttin' panelin' on those walls! And paperin' with that expensive paper! It must have cost land knows how much a roll. And, for the

dear land sakes, what are those carpenters cuttin' that hole in the upper deck for?"

"For stairs, of course," says he. "Think the customers are goin' to fly up there? Don't bother me, Skipper, I'm busy."

"Stairs!" I sings out. "Why, there's stairs already. What's the matter with the steps leadin' aloft from the back room? *We've* used them ever since we've been here, and —"

"S-shh! S-shh!" says he, resigned but impatient. "Cap'n, your business instinct is all right in some things, like — like — well, I can't think what just now, but never mind. You're a good feller, but you're too apt to cal'late by last year's almanac. You ain't as up to date as you might be. Do you suppose Her Majesty Burke Smythe, and the rest of the Royal Family we're settin' this trap for, will take the trouble to hunt up that back room, and fall over egg cases and kerosene barrels to find the ladder to that loft? And climb the ladder after they find it? No, no! We'll have a flight of stairs right from the main part of this store, where they can't help seein' 'em. And there'll be old-fashioned rag mats on the landin's, and brass candlesticks with candles in 'em at night, and —"

"Candles!" says I. "Well; that is the final piece of lunacy! Why, I could light those stairs like a glory with kerosene lamps while a body was tryin'

to get *sight* of 'em with a candle! I never heard such nonsense."

But 'twas no use. What we must do was make that loft "quaint," and old-fashioned, and the like of that. I didn't understand — and so on.

"All right," says I, "maybe I don't; but I do understand this: Judgin' by the amount of hard cash you've spent for lace tuckers and doilies, and the bill them stairs and panelin's and candlesticks'll come to, I don't see a profit on the Pilgrim Curio Mothers' Exchange in ten year big enough to cover a five-cent piece."

He'd risk the profit. Besides, there was another reason for the stairs, and such. To get to 'em all, the rich folks would have to go right through the store; and if they didn't buy anything upstairs they would down, sure and sartin. He was figgerin' on catchin' the transient trade, the automobile trade; and all around the foot of the stairs we'd have temptin' lunches put up and set out, and bottles of ginger ale and boxes of cigars, and so forth, and so on. He preached for half an hour, windin' up with:

"Anyhow, Skipper, if the curio shop should lose money — which it won't — it will bring customers to the Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes, and Fancy Goods Store, which is the main thing; that and keepin' the coin in the United States instead of shippin' it to Armenia. The embroideries and

laces are by-products, as you might say; and if a plant comes out even on its by-products, it's a payin' proposition."

He had me there. I didn't know a by-product from a salt herrin'; so I shut up.

The "Old Colony Women's Exchange and Curio Room," which was the name he finally picked out, opened at the end of a fortni't. Jacobs had advertised it in the papers, and put signs for miles up and down the main roads, let alone tellin' every well-off summer woman within reachin' distance. And, almost from the very start, it done well. The loft was crowded 'most every afternoon; and sometimes there'd be as many as three automobiles anchored alongside our main platform.

At the end of the fust month, the Exchange had cleared — cleared, mind you — over two hundred dollars; and Jim Henry was crowin' over me like a Shanghai rooster over a bantam. He'd had another happy thought, and had added "antiques" to the stock in the loft; and the prices he got for lame chairs and rheumatic tables was somethin' scandalous. But it wa'n't all joy. There was two things that troubled him.

One of the things was that the supply of knittin' and fancywork was givin' out. Likewise the "antiques." Of course, there was some on hand. Aunt Susannah Cahoon's yeller and black mittens, ear lap-

pets, and tippets hadn't sold, and wa'n't likely to; and Abinadab Saint's alabaster whale-oil lamp with the crack in it, that his Great-uncle Peleg brought home from sea, hadn't been grabbed to any extent. But these were the exceptions. 'Most all the good stuff had gone; and, though Jacobs had raked the county with a fine-tooth comb, as you might say, the reg'lar dealers from Boston had raked it ahead of him, and there wa'n't any "antiques" left.

There was several reasons for the shortage in fancywork. One was that the knitters and tatters couldn't turn it out fast enough; and, moreover, the season for church fairs was settin' in, and the heft of the females, bein' reg'lar members in good standin', *had* to tack ship and go to helpin' their meetin'-houses. So our stock was gettin' low, and Jim Henry was worried.

The other thing that worried him was that we couldn't get the right kind of help to sell the stuff. He couldn't tend to it himself, bein' too busy otherwise. Mary had the post-office department on her hands. The clerk and the delivery boys wa'n't fitted for the job at all; and, as for me, I couldn't sell a blue sugar bowl without a cover for seven dollars and take the money. I knew the one that bought it was perfectly satisfied, but I couldn't do it; I ain't built that way.

"It's no use, Jim Henry," says I. "I may be

foolish, but I have ideas about some things; and it's my notion that sartin kinds of folks are fitted by nature for sartin kinds of things. Now, Cape Codders they're fitted for seafarin', and such; and New Yorkers and Chicagoers, like you, are fitted for stock-brokin' and storekeepin'; and Italians for hand organs, and diggin' streets, and singin' in opera. And when it comes to sellin' secondhand stuff or keepin' a pawnshop, there's —"

"Rubbish!" he snaps. "A while ago, you'd have said that the embroidery trade was cornered by the Armenians. We've proved that's a fairy tale, ain't we? I've got some ideas myself. I know the kind of person I want to run that Exchange, and, sooner or later, I'll find him — or her. Meantime, we'll have to do the best we can; and I'll take it as a favor if you'll let up on the hammer exercise."

I wa'n't sure what he meant by the "hammer exercise"; but 'twas plain enough that them "by-products" was a sore subject, and that he was worried.

However, he wa'n't the only worried lace dealer in the neighborhood. The Old Colony Exchange had made good in one direction, anyhow. It had knocked the embroidery peddlin' business higher'n a kite. Where there used to be a dozen suit-case luggers paradin' through the town, now you scarcely sighted one; and that one looked pretty sick and dis-

couraged. The home market had smashed foreign competition for the time bein'; that much was pretty sure. But our stock kept gettin' lower and lower, and the auto crowds begun to go by now instead of stoppin'. And the few that did stop hardly ever bought anything unless Jim Henry himself was there to hypnotize 'em into it.

One mornin' I came to the store pretty late, and found our clerk talkin' to a dark-complected chap with curly hair and a suit case. I didn't shove my bows into the talk; but, when 'twas over, I asked the clerk what the critter wanted. He laughed.

"Oh, he's the last survivor of the peddlin' crew," he says. "He ain't sold a thing, and he's goin' back to Boston right off. I told him he might as well. He asked a lot of questions about the Exchange, and I took him upstairs and showed him around."

"You did?" says I. "What for?"

"Oh, just to let him see what he was up against, that's all. He was a pretty decent feller — some of them Armenians ain't so bad — and I pitied him. He was awful discouraged. He'd heard Mr. Jacobs had been tryin' to hire a salesman for up there; and he hinted that he'd kind of like the job."

"Did, hey?" says I. "Well, it's a good thing for you and him that Mr. Jacobs didn't catch you.

He'd sooner have a snake on the premises than one of them peddlers. What else did he say? Anything?"

Why, yes. It developed that he'd said a good deal. Asked where we got our stuff, and so on. I judged 'twas a providence that I come in when I did, or that clerk would have told every last word he knew. I didn't say anything to Jim Henry. No use frettin' him unnecessary.

Three days after that the Injun showed up. I don't know as you know it, but there are a few Injuns left on the Cape — half-breeds, or three-quarters, they are mostly; and they live up around Cohasset Narrows, or off in the woods in those latitudes. This one was an old feller, black-haired, of course, and kind of fleshy, with a hook nose and skin the color of gingerbread. I heard talk upstairs in the Exchange; and, when I went aloft, I found him and Jim Henry settin' among the by-products, and as confidential as a couple of rats in a schooner's hold. Soon as Jacobs seen me, he sung out for me to heave alongside.

"Look at that, Cap'n Zeb," he says. "What do you think of that?"

I took what he handed me, and looked at it. 'Twas a piece of handmade lace — a centerpiece, I believe they call it — and 'twas mighty well done.

"Think of it?" says I. "Well, I ain't much of

a judge, but I'd call it a pretty slick article. Who made it?"

The old black-haired chap answered.

"My sister," he says. "She make 'em. Make 'em plenty."

"Bully for her!" says I. "She's the lady we've been lookin' for. Maybe she make some more; hey?"

He grinned; and Jacobs mentioned for me to clear out; so I done it. He and old Gingerbread Face stayed aloft in that Exchange for upward of an hour; and, when they came down, Jim Henry went with him as fur as the door. When the stranger had gone, Jim turns to me and stuck out his hand.

"Skipper," says he, grinnin' like a punkin lantern, "shake! I've got it."

"What have you got?" I asked. I was a little mite provoked at bein' sent below so unceremonious. "What have you got — Asiatic cholery? Thought you wouldn't have nothin' to do with Armenians."

"Armenians be hanged!" says he. "That's no Armenian. He's an Indian, a full-blooded Indian, or pretty near it. And his family is about the only full-bloods left. There's a colony of them up the Cape a ways; and it seems that they pick berries in the summer, and put in their winters turnin' out stuff like that centerpiece. He heard about the Ex-

change, and he's come way down here to see if we bought such things. I told him we bought 'em with bells on, and he'll be back here to-morrow with another load."

Sure enough, he was, load and all; and 'twould have astonished you to see what fust-class fancywork his sister and the rest of the squaws turned out. Jacobs bought the whole lot, and ordered more; said he'd take all the tribe could scare up; and old Gingerbread — his American name, so he said, was Rose, Solomon Rose — went away happy. When I found what Jim Henry had paid him for the plunder, I didn't blame Rose for bein' joyful.

But Jacobs didn't care. He was all excitement and hurrah again. He had a new addition made to the Exchange sign. 'Twas "The Old Colony Women's Exchange, Curio Room, and Indian Exhibit" now; and inside of two days the Burke Smythes and their friends was callin' reg'lar, the auto parties was rollin' up to the door, and the money was rollin' in. Injun embroidery was somethin' new; and the summer gang snapped at it like bullfrogs at a red rag.

Then that partner of mine was seized violent with another rush of ideas to the head. I'm blessed if he didn't hire old Rose — the "Last of the Mohicans," he called him, among other ridiculous and outlandish names — to spend his days in that Injun

Exchange loft. Paid him ten dollars a week, he did, just to set there and look the part. 'Twas a sinful waste of money, 'cordin' to my notion; but Jim Henry shut me up like a huntin'-case watch — with a snap.

"Who said he could sell?" he wanted to know. "I didn't, did I? I don't know that he can't — he's shrewd enough when it comes to sellin' us the stuff he brings with him; but if he don't sell a fifty-cent article —"

"Which he won't," I interrupted; "for there's nothin' less than two-seventy-five *in* the robbers' den, and you know it. How you have the face to charge —"

"Will you be quiet?" he wanted to know. "As I say, whether he sells or not, he's wuth his wages twice over. Can't you understand? Just oblige me by rubbin' your brains with scourin' soap or somethin', and *try* to understand. All the auto bunch ain't lambs; some of them — the males especially — are a fairly cagey collection; and there's been doubts expressed concernin' the genuineness of our Injun exhibit. But with old Uncas — with the Last of the Mohicans himself right on deck as a livin' guarantee, why, we could sell clam-shells as small change from Sittin' Bull's wampum belt, and never raise a sacrilegious question even from a Unitarian freethinker. It's a cinch."

"See here, Jim Henry," says I, "if this thing's a fraud, I won't have anything to do with it."

"Neither will I," says he, emphatic. "Frauds don't pay, not in the long run. But grandmother's genuine antiques and the A-number-one, Simon-pure embroideries of the noble red man — or woman — pay, and don't you forget it."

They did pay; and old Mohican himself was a payin' investment, too, in spite of my doubts and Jeremiah prophesyin'. He made a ten-strike with every female that hit that loft. They said he was so "quaint," and "odd," and "pathetic." Mrs. Burke Smythe vowed there was somethin' "big" and "great" about him — meanin' his nose or his boots, I presume likely — and, somehow or other, though he didn't look like a salesman, he sold. And every week or so he'd take a day off and go back home, to return with a fresh supply of tidies, and lace, and gimcracks. I changed my mind about Injuns. I see right off that all the yarns I'd read about 'em was lies. They didn't murder nor scalp their enemies — they smothered 'em with lamp mats.

And 'twa'n't fancywork alone that the Rose critter fetched back from these home v'yages of his. He struck an "antique" vein somewheres in the reservation; and not a week went by that he didn't resurrect an old bedstead or a table or a spinnin' wheel or somethin', and fetched 'em down in an old wagon

towed by an old white horse. The "children of the forest"— which was another of Jim Henry's names for the Injuns and half-breeds — didn't give up these things for nothin'; far from it. We had to pay as much as if they was made of solid silver; but we sold 'em at gold prices, so that part was all right.

And every other day Jacobs would ask me what I thought of "by-products" now. As for Armenian competition, it was dead. There wa'n't any.

Well, three more weeks drifted along, and the summer season was 'most over. Then, one Tuesday mornin', old Rose, the Mohican, didn't show up. He'd gone away on Friday cal'latin' to be back Monday with a fresh lot of "antiques" and centerpieces; but he wa'n't. And Tuesday and Wednesday passed, and he didn't come. Jim Henry was awful worried. We needed more stock, and we needed our Injun curio; and nothin' would do but I must turn myself into a relief expedition and hunt him up.

"Somethin's happened, sure," says Jacobs. "He's never missed his time afore. Those fellers pride themselves on keepin' their word — you read Cooper, if you don't believe it — and he's sick or dead; one or the other."

"Dead nothin'!" says I. "He's too tough to kill, and nothin' would make him sick but soap and

water, which ain't one of his bad habits by a consider'ble sight. However, if it'll make you any easier, I'll take the mornin' train and locate him if I can."

"Go ahead," says he. "I'd do it myself, but I can't leave just now. Go ahead, Skipper, and don't come back till you've got him, or found out why he isn't on hand."

So I took the mornin' train and set out to locate the noble red man.

CHAPTER IX

ROSES—BY ANOTHER NAME

BUT locatin' him wa'n't such an easy matter. All we knew was he lived somewheres in Wampaquoit, and Wampaquoit is ten miles from nowhere, in the woods up around Cohasset Narrows. I got off the train at the Narrows depot, and, after considerable cruisin' and bargainin', I hired a horse and buggy, and started to drive over. I lost my way and got onto a wood road. Don't ask me about that road. I don't want to talk about it. I'd been on salt water for a good many years, and I'd seen some rough goin', but rockin' and bouncin' over that wood road come nigher to makin' me seasick than any of my Grand Banks trips. Narrow! And grown over! My land! I had to stoop to keep from bein' scraped off the seat; and, whenever I'd straighten up to ease my back, a pine branch would fetch me a slap in the face that you could hear half a mile.

As for my language, you could hear that *two* miles. That road ruined my moral reputation, I'm afraid. They had a revival meetin' in the Narrows

meetin'-house the follerin' week, but whether 'twas on my account or not I don't know.

However, I made port after a spell — that is, I run afoul of a house and lot in a clearin' sort of; and I asked a black-lookin' male critter, who was asleep under a tree, how to get to Wampaquoit. He riz upon one elbow, brushed the mosquitoes away from his mouth, and made answer that 'twas Wampaquoit I was in.

"But the town?" says I. "Where's the town?"

Well, it appeared that this was the town, or part of it. The rest was scattered along through the next three or four mile of wilderness. Where was the center? Oh, there wa'n't any. There was a schoolhouse and a meetin'-house, and a blacksmith's, and such, on the main road up a piece, that was all.

"But where do the Injuns live?" I wanted to know. "The knittin' women, the Lamp Mat Trust — where does it — she — they, I mean, live?"

He couldn't seem to make much out of this; and by and by he went into the house and fetched out his wife. She was about as black as he was; and I cal'lated they was a Portygee family; but, no, lo and behold you, it turned out they was Injuns themselves! But they never heard of anybody named Rose, nor of anybody that knit centerpieces, nor of an "antique," nor anything. I give it up pretty soon, for

my temper was beginnin' to heat up the surroundin' air, and the mosquitoes seemed to think I was "Old Home Week," and come for miles around and brought their relations. I give up and drove away over a fairly decent road this time, till I found another house. But this was just the same; Injuns in plenty —'most everybody was part Injun — but nobody had heard of our special Mohican nor of an "antique." And, which was queerer still, they never heard of anybody around that done knittin' or crochetin' or lace makin', or had sold any, if they did do it. And they didn't any of 'em talk story-book Injun dialect, same as Uncas did. They used pretty fair United States.

Well, to bile this yarn of mine down, I rode through those woods and around the settlement most of that afternoon. Then I was ready to give up, and so was my old livery-stable horse. He'd gone dead lame, and 'twould have been a sin and a shame to make him walk a step farther. I took him to the blacksmith's shop, and left him there. I pounded mosquitoes, and asked the blacksmith some questions, and he pounded iron and wanted to ask me a million; but neither of us got a heap of satisfaction out of the duet.

Two things seemed to be sure and sartin. One was that Solomon Uncas Rose, the "child of the forest" and chief of the tattin' tribe, was mistook

when he give Wampaquoit as his home town; and t'other that, much as I wanted to, I couldn't get out of that town until evenin'. My horse wa'n't fit to travel, and I couldn't hire another, not until after the blacksmith had had his supper. Then he'd hitch up and drive me back to the Narrows.

But luck was with me for once. Up the road came bumpin' a nice-lookin' mare and runabout wagon, with a pleasant-faced, gray-haired man on the seat. The mare pulled up at the blacksmith's house, and the man got down and went inside.

"Who's that?" says I. "And what's he done to be sentenced to this place?"

"Doctor," says the blacksmith, with a grunt — he was one-quarter Injun, too. "Comes from West Ostable. My wife's sick."

"I sympathize with her," says I. "I'm sick, too — homesick. Maybe this doctor'll help me out. What I need is a change of scene; and I need it bad."

So, when the doctor come out of the house, I hailed him, and asked him if he'd do a kindness to a shipwrecked mariner stranded on a lee shore.

"Why, what's the matter?" says he, laughin'.

"Matter enough," I told him. "I want to go home. Besides, a merciful man is merciful to the beasts; and if I stay here much longer these mosquitoes'll die of rush of my blood to their heads.

I understand you come from West Ostable, Doctor; but if 'twas Jericho 'twould be all the same. I want you to let me ride there with you. And you can charge anything you want to."

That doctor was a fine feller. He laughed some more, and told me to jump right in. Said he'd got to see one more patient on his way back; but, if I didn't mind that stop, he'd be glad of my company. So I told the blacksmith to keep my horse and buggy overnight, and when I got to West Ostable I'd telephone for the livery folks to send for 'em. Then I got into the doctor's runabout, and off we drove.

We did consider'ble talkin' durin' the drive; but 'twas all general, and nothin' definite on my part. 'Course, he was curious to know what I was doin' 'way over there; but I said I come on business, and let it go at that. I was beginnin' to have some suspicions, and I cal'lated not to be laughed at if I could help it. So we drove and drove; and, by and by, when I judged we must be pretty nigh to West Ostable, he turned the horse into a side road, and brought him to anchor alongside of an old ramshackle house, with a tumble-down barn and outbuildin's astern of it.

"Now, Cap'n," he says, "I'll have to ask you to wait a few minutes while I see that last patient of mine. 'Twon't take long."

"Patient?" says I. "Good land! Does anybody *live* in this fag end of nothin'ness?"

"Yes," says he. "'Twas empty for years, but now a couple of fellers live here all by themselves. Foreigners of some kind they are. Been here for a month or more. One of 'em let a packin' case fall on his foot, and —"

"I sympathize with him," says I. "The same thing happened to me a spell ago. But a packin' case! Cranberry crate, you mean, I guess."

"Maybe so," he says. "I didn't ask. But 'twas somethin' heavy, anyhow. Nobody seems to know much about these chaps or what they do. Well, be as comfort'ble as you can. I'll be back soon."

He took his medicine satchel and went into the house. Soon's he was out of sight, I climbed out of the buggy and started explorin'. I was curious.

I wandered around back of the house. Such a slapjack place you never see in your life! Windows plugged with papers and old rags, shingles off the roof, chimneys shy of bricks —'twas a miracle it didn't blow down long ago. Whoever the tenants was, they was only temporary, I judged, and willin' to take chances.

From somewheres out in the barn I heard a scratchin' kind of noise, and I headed for there. The big door was open a little ways, and I squeezed

through. 'Twas pretty dark, and I couldn't see much for a minute; but soon as my eyes got used to the gloominess, I saw lots of things. That barn was half filled with boxes and crates, some empty and some not. There was a horse in the stall — an old white horse — and standin' in the middle of the floor was a wagon heaped with things, and covered with a piece of tarpaulin. I lifted the tarpaulin. Underneath it was a spinnin' wheel, an old-fashioned table, two chairs, and a basket. There was embroidery and fancywork in the basket.

Then I took a few soundin's among the full boxes and crates standin' round. I didn't do much of this, 'cause the scratchin' noise kept up in a room at the back of the barn, and I wa'n't anxious to disturb the scratcher, whoever he was. But I saw a plenty. There was enough bran-new "antiques" and "genuine" Injun knittin' work in them crates and boxes to stock the "Colonial Exchange" for six weeks, even with better trade than we'd had.

I'd seen all I wanted to in *that* room, so I tiptoed into the other. A feller was in there, standin' back to me, and hard at work. He was sandpaperin' the polish off a mahogany sewin' table; the kind Mrs. Burke Smythe called a "find," and had in her best front parlor as an example of what our great-granddads used to make, and we wa'n't capable of in these cheap and shoddy days. There was

another "find" on the floor side of him, a chair layin' on its side. Pasted on the under side of the seat was a paper label with "Grand Rivers Furniture Manufacturing Company" printed on it. I judged that the hand of Time hadn't got to work on that chair yet, but it would as soon as it had antiqued the table.

I watched the mellowin' influence gettin' in its licks — much as twenty year passed over that table in the three minutes I stood there — and then I spoke.

"Hello, shipmate!" says I. "You're busy, ain't you?"

He jumped as if I'd stuck a sail needle in him, the table tipped over with a bang, and he swung around and faced me. And I'm blessed if he wa'n't that Armenian critter; the one that the clerk had talked to — the "last survivor of the peddlin' crew."

I was expectin' 'most anything to happen, and I was kind of hopin' it would. My fists sort of shut of themselves. But it didn't happen. I knew the feller; but, as luck would have it, he didn't recognize me. He swallered hard a couple of times, and then he says, pretty average ugly:

"Vat d'ye want?"

"Oh, nothin'," says I. "I just drove over with the doctor, and I cruised 'round the premises a little,

that's all. You must do a good business here. Make this stuff yourself?"

"No," he snapped.

I could see that he was dyin' to chuck me out, and didn't dast to. I picked up the chair and looked at it.

"Humph!" I says. "Grand Rivers Company, hey? Buy of them, do you?"

"Yes," says he.

"And this?" I took a centerpiece out of one of the boxes. "This come from Grand Rivers, too?"

"No," says he. "Boston. Is dere anything else you vant to know?"

"Guess not. You the sick man?"

"No; mine brudder."

"Your brother, hey? Let's see. I wonder if I don't know him. Kind of tall and thin, ain't he?"

He sniffed contemptuous.

"No," says he, "he's short and fat."

"Beg your pardon," says I, "guess I was mistook. Well, I must be gettin' back to the buggy; the doctor's prob'ly waitin' for me. Good day, mister."

He never said good-by; but I saw him watchin' me all the way to the gate. I climbed into the buggy, and set there till he went back into the barn; then I got down and hurried to the front of the

house. The door wa'n't fastened, and I went in. I met the doctor in the hall. He was some surprised to see me there.

"Hello, Doc!" says I. "Where's your patient?"

"In there," says he, pointin' to the door astern of him. "But —"

"How's he gettin' along?" I wanted to know.

"Why, he's better," he says. "He's practically all right. I wanted him to get up and walk, but he wouldn't."

"Wouldn't, hey?" says I. "Humph! Well, maybe he wouldn't walk for you; but I'll bet *I* can make him *fly*."

Before he could stop me, I flung that door open and walked into that room. The sufferer from fallin' packin' boxes was settin' in one chair with his foot in another. I drew off, and slapped him on the shoulder hard as I could.

"Hello, Sol Uncas Mohicans!" I sung out. "How's genuine antique lamp mats these days?"

For about two seconds he just set there and looked at me, set and glared, with his mouth open. Then he let out a scream like a scared woman, jumped out of that chair, and made for the kitchen door, lame foot and all. I headed him off, and he turned and set sail for the one I'd come in at. He reached the front hall just ahead of me; but my

boot caught him at the top step and helped him *some*. He never stopped at the gate, but went head-first into the woods whoopin' anthems.

The sandpaperin' chap came runnin' out of the barn, and I took after him; but he didn't wait to see what I had to say. He dove for the woods on his side. We had the premises to ourselves, and I went back and picked up the doctor, who'd been upset by the "child of the forest" on his way to the ancestral tall timber.

"What — what — what?" gasps the medical man. "For Heaven sakes! Why, he wouldn't *try* to walk when I asked him to. *How* did you do that?"

"Easy enough," says I. "'Twas an old-fashioned treatment, but it helps — in some cases. Just layin' on of hands, that's all. Now, Doc, afore you ask another question, let me ask you one. Ain't that critter's name Rose?"

He was consider'ble shook, but he managed to grin a little.

"No," says he, "but you've guessed pretty near it."

Then he told me what the name was.

I rode back to West Ostable with that doctor and took the evenin' train home. Jim Henry was waitin' for me on the store platform when I got out of the depot wagon.

"Well?" he wanted to know. "Did you find him?"

"Humph!" says I. "I did find the lost tribes, a couple of members of 'em, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?" says he.

"Come somewheres where 'tain't so public and I'll tell you."

So we went back into the back room and I told him my yarn. He listened, with his mouth open, gettin' madder and madder all the time.

"Now," says I, endin' up, "the way I look at it is this. I've been thinkin' it out on the cars and I cal'late we'll have to do this way. We ain't crooks — that is, we didn't mean to be — and now we know all our 'antiques' are frauds and our 'Injun curios' made up to Boston, we must either shut up the 'Exchange' or go back to home products. We'll have to keep mum about those we have sold, because most of 'em have been carted out of town and we don't know where to locate the buyers. But, for my part, bein' average honest and meanin' to be square, I feel mighty bad. What do you say?"

He said enough. He felt as bad as I did about stickin' our customers, but what seemed to cut him the most was that somebody had got ahead of him in business.

"Think of it!" says he. "Skipper, we're gold-

bricked! Cheated! Faked! Done! Think of it! If I could only get my hands on that —"

"Hold on a minute," says I. "Better think the whole of it while you're about it. We set out to drive those peddlers out of what was *their* trade. If they was smart enough to turn the tables and make a good profit out of sellin' us the stuff, I don't know as I blame 'em much. It was just tit for tat — or so it seems to me now that I've cooled off."

"Maybe so," says he; "but it hurts my pride just the same. James Henry Jacobs, doctor of sick businesses, beat by a couple of peddlers from Armenia!"

"Hold on again," I says. "I ain't told you their real name yet."

"Their name?" he says. "I know it already. It's Rose."

"Not accordin' to that West Ostable doctor, it ain't. The name they give *him* was Rosenstein."

He looked at me for a spell without speakin'. Then he smiled, heaved a long breath, and reached over and shook my hand.

"Whew!" says he. "Skipper, I feel better. Richard's himself again. To be beat in a business deal by Roses is one thing — but by Rosensteins is another. You can't beat the Rosensteins in business."

"Not in the secondhand and by-productin' busi-

ness you can't," says I. "Them lines belong to 'em. We hadn't any right to butt in."

And we both laughed, good and hearty.

"But," says I, after a little, "what'll we do with that curio room, anyway? Give it up?"

"Not much!" says he, emphatic. "I guess we'll have to give up the antiques; but we've got the winter ahead of us, Skipper, and the Ostable County embroidery crop flourishes best in cold weather. We'll start the old ladies knittin' again and have a fairly good-sized stock when the autos commence runnin' once more. Give up the Colonial Pilgrim Mothers? I should say not!"

"All right," I says, dubious. "You may be right, Jim; you generally are. But I'm a little scary of this by-product game. It'll get us into serious trouble, I'm afraid, some day. It's easier to steer one big craft, than 'tis to maneuver a fleet of little ones."

He sniffed, scornful. "As I understand it, Cap'n Zeb," he says, "this business of yours was in a pretty feeble condition when you called me in to prescribe."

"No doubt of that, Jim, but —"

"Yes. And it's a healthy, growin' child now."

"Yes. It sartin is."

"Then, if I was you, I'd take my medicine and be thankful. Time enough to complain when you

commence to go into another decline. Ain't that so?"

I didn't answer.

"Isn't it so?" he asked again.

"Maybe," I said; "but it may be a fatal disease next time; and it's better to keep well than to be cured — and a lot cheaper."

He said I was a reg'lar bullfrog for croakin', and hinted that I was in the back row of the primer class so fur's business instinct went. I had a feelin' that he was right, but I had another feelin' that *I* was right, too. However, there was nothin' to do but keep quiet and wait the next development. Afore Christmas the development landed with both feet.

I'd heard the news twice already that mornin'. Fust at the Poquit House breakfast table, where 'twas served along with the chopped hay cereal and warmed over and picked to pieces, as you might say, all through the b'iled eggs and spider-bread, plumb down to the doughnuts and imitation coffee. Then I'd no sooner got outdoor than Solon Saunders sighted me, and he 'bout ship and beat acrost the road like a porgie-boat bearin' down on a school of fish. He was so excited that he couldn't wait to get alongside, but commenced heavin' overboard his cargo of information while he was in mid-channel.

"Did you hear about the Higgins Place bein'

rented, Cap'n Snow?" he sung out. "It's been took for next summer and —"

"Yes, yes, I heard it," says I. "Fine seasonable weather we're havin' these days. Don't see any signs of snow yet, do you?"

If he'd been skipper of a pleasure boat with a picnic party aboard he couldn't have paid less attention to my weather signals.

"It's been hired for an eatin'-house," he says, puffin' and out of breath. "A man by the name of Fred from Buffalo, has hired it, and —"

"Fred, hey?" I interrupted. "Humph! 'Cordin' to the proclamations *I* heard he cruises under the name of George — Eben George — and he hails from Bangor."

"No, no!" he says, emphatic. "His name's Edgar Fred and it's Buffalo he comes from. Henry Williams told me and he got it from his wife's aunt, Mrs. Debby Baker, and her cousin by marriage told her. She is a Knowles — the cousin is — married one of the Denboro Knowleses — and *she* got it from Peleg Kendrick's nephew whose stepmother is related to the woman that used to do old Judge Higgins's cookin' when he was alive. So it come straight, you see."

"Yes," I says, "about as straight as the eel went through the snarled fish net. All right. I don't care. How's your rheumatiz gettin' on, Solon?"

I thought that would fetch him, but it didn't. Gen'rally speakin', he'd talk for an hour about his rheumatiz and never skip an ache; but now he was too much interested in the Higgins Place even to catalogue his symptoms.

"It's some better," he says, "since I tried the Electric Ointment out of the newspaper. But, Cap'n Zeb, did you know that this Fred man was goin' to start a swell dinin'-room for automobile folks? He is. He's had all kinds of experience in them lines. He's goin' to have foreign help and a chief Frenchman to do the cookin' and — and I don't know what all."

"I guess that's right," says I. "Well, I don't know what all, either, and I ain't goin' to worry. We'll see what we shall see, as the blind feller said. Hello! there's the minister over there and I'll bet he ain't heard a word about it."

That done the trick. Away he put, all sail set, to give the minister the earache, and I went on down to the store. And there was Jacobs talkin' to a man I'd never seen afore and both of 'em so interested they scarcely noticed me when I come in.

He was a kind of ordinary-lookin' feller at fust sight, the stranger was, sort of a cross between a parson and a circus agent, judgin' by his get-up. Pretty thin, with black hair and a black beard, and dressed all in black except his vest, which was thun-

der-storm plaid. I'd have cal'lated he was in mournin' if it hadn't been for that vest. As 'twas he looked like a hearse with a brass band aboard. Both him and Jacobs was smokin' cigars, the best ten-centers we carried in stock.

"Mornin'," says I, passin' by 'em. Jim Henry looked up and saw me.

"Ah, Skipper," says he; "glad to see you. Come here. I want to make you acquainted with Mr. Edwin Frank, who is intendin' to locate here in Ostable. Mr. Frank, shake hands with my partner, Cap'n Zebulon Snow."

We shook, the band wagon hearse and me, and I felt as if I was back aboard the old *Fair Breeze,* handlin' cold fish. Jim Henry went right along explainin' matters.

"Mr. Frank," he says, "has had a long experience in the restaurant and hotel line and he believes there is an openin' for a first-class road-house in this town. He has leased the —"

Then I understood. "Why, yes, yes!" I interrupted. "I know now. You're Mr. Eben Edgar Fred George from Buffalo and Bangor, ain't you?"

Then *they* didn't understand. When I explained about the boardin'-house talk and Solon Saunders' "straight" news, Jacobs laughed fit to kill and even Mr. Fred George Frank pumped up a smile. But his pumps was out of gear, or somethin', for the

smile looked more like a crack in an ice chest than anything human. However, he said he was glad to see me and I strained the truth enough to say I was glad to meet him.

"So you've hired the Higgins Place, Mr. Frank," I went on. "Well, well! And you're goin' to make a hotel of it. If old Judge Higgins don't turn over in his grave at that, he's fast moored, that's all."

I meant what I said, almost. Judge Higgins, in his day, had been one of the big-bugs of the town and his place on the hill was one of the best on the main road. It set 'way back from the street and the view from under the two big silver-leaf trees by the front door took in all creation and part of Ostable Neck, as the sayin' is. The Judge had been dead most eight year now, and, bein' a three times widower without chick nor child, the estate was all tied up amongst the heirs of the three wives and was fast tumblin' to pieces. It couldn't be sold, on account of the row between the owners, but it had been let once or twice to summer folks. To turn it into a tavern was pretty nigh the final come-down, seemed to me.

But Jim Henry Jacobs wa'n't worryin' about come-downs. He never let dead dignity interfere with live business. He didn't shed a tear over the old place, or lay a wreath on Judge Higgins's tomb.

No, sir! he got down to the keelson of things in a jiffy.

"Skipper," he says, sweet and plausible as a dose of sugared soothin'-syrup. "Skipper," he says, "Mr. Frank's proposition is to open, not a hotel exactly, but a first-class, up-to-date road-house and restaurant. As progressive citizens of Ostable, as business men, wide-awake to the town's welfare, that ought to interest you and me, on general principles, hadn't it?"

I judged that this was only Genesis, and that Revelation would come later, so I nodded and said I cal'lated that it had — on general principles.

"You bet!" he goes on. "It does interest us. Speakin' personally, I've long felt that there was a place in Ostable for a dinin'-room, run to bag — to attract, I mean — the wealthy, the well-to-do transient trade. Why, just think of it!" he says, warmin' up, "it's winter now. By May or June there'll be a steady string of autos runnin' along this road here, every one of 'em solid full of city people and all hungry. Now, it's a shame to let those good things — I mean hungry gents and ladies, go by without givin' 'em what they want. If I hadn't had so many things on my mind, if the Ostable Store's large and growin' business hadn't took my attention exclusive, I should have ventured a flyer in that direction myself. But never mind that; Mr.

Frank here has got ahead of me and the job's in better hands. Mr. Frank is right up to the minute; he's abreast of the times and he — by the way, Mr. Frank, perhaps you wouldn't mind tellin' my partner here somethin' about your plans. Just give him the line of talk you've been givin' me, say."

Mr. Frank didn't mind. He had the line over in a minute and if I'd been cal'latin' that he was a frosty specimen with the water in his talk-b'iler froze, I got rid of the notion in a hurry. He smiled, polite, and begun slow and deliberate, but pretty soon he was runnin' twenty knots an hour. He told about his experience in the eatin'-house line — he'd been everything from hotel manager to club steward — and about how successful he'd been and how big the profits was, and what his customers said about him, and so on. Afore a body had a chance to think this over — or to digest it, long's we're talkin' about eatin'— he was under full steam through Ostable with the Higgins Place loaded to the guards and beatin' all entries two mile to the lap. He'd never seen a better openin'; his experience backed his judgment in callin' it the ideal location and opportunity, and the like of that. He talked his throat dry and wound up, husky but hurrahin', with somethin' like this:

"Cap'n Snow," he says, "you and Mr. Jacobs must understand that I know what I'm talkin' about.

This enterprise of mine will be the very highest class. French chef, French waiters, all the delicacies and game in season. A country Delmonico's, that's the dope — ahem! I mean that is the reputation this establishment of ours will have; yes."

I judged that the "dope" had slipped out unexpected and that the miscue jarred him a little mite, for he colored up and wiped his forehead with a red and yellow bordered handkerchief. I was jarred, too, but not by that.

"Establishment of *ours?*" I says, slow. "You mean yours, of course."

He was goin' to answer, but Jim Henry got ahead of him.

"Sure! of course, Skipper," he says. "That's all right. There!" he went on, gettin' up and takin' me by the arm. "Mr. Frank's got to be trottin' along and we mustn't detain him. So long, Mr. Frank. My partner and I will have some conversation and we'll meet again. Drop in any time. Good day."

I hadn't noticed any signs of Frank's impatience to trot along, but he took the hint all right and got up to go. He said good-by and I was turnin' away, when I see Jim Henry wink at him when they thought I wa'n't lookin'. I was suspicious afore; that wink made me uneasy as a spring pullet tied to the choppin'-block.

CHAPTER X

THE SIGN OF THE WINDMILL

EBEN GEORGE EDGAR EDWIN DELMONICO FRANK went out, dabbin' at his forehead with the red and yellow handkerchief. Jacobs kept his clove hitch on my arm and led me out to the settee on the front platform.

"Set down, Skipper," he says, cheerful and more'n extra friendly, seemed to me. "Set down," he says, "and enjoy the December ozone."

We come to anchor on the settee and there we set and shivered for much as five minutes, each of us waitin' for the other to begin. Finally Jim Henry says, without lookin' at me:

"Well, Skipper," he says, "that chap's sharp all right, ain't he?"

"Seems to be," says I, not too enthusiastic.

"Yes, he is. If I'm any judge of human nature — and I hand myself *that* bouquet any day in the week — he knows his business. Don't you think so?"

"Maybe," I says. "But what business of ours his business is I don't see — yet. If you do, bein'

as you and me are supposed to be partners, perhaps you wouldn't mind soundin' the fog whistle for my benefit. I seem to have lost my reckonin' on this v'yage. Why should we be interested in this Frank man and his eatin'-house?"

He laughed, louder'n was necessary, I thought, and slapped me on the shoulder.

"You don't see where we come in, hey?" he says. "Well, I do. A dinin'-room like that one of his will need a good many supplies, won't it? And, if I can mesmerize him into patronizin' the home market, the Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Emporium will gain some, I shouldn't wonder. Hey, pard! How about that?" And he slapped my shoulder again.

I turned this over in my mind. "Humph!" I says. "I begin to see."

"You bet you do!" he says, laughin'. "The amount of stuff I can sell that restaurant will —"

But I broke in here. I remembered that wink and I didn't believe I was clear of the choppin'-block yet.

"Hold on!" says I. "Heave to! And never mind poundin' my starboard shoulder to pieces, either. I said I *begun* to see; I don't see clear yet. How did you and he come to get together in the fust place? Did you go and hunt him up? or did he come in here to see you?"

He kind of hesitated. "Why," he says, "he come into the store, and —"

"Did he happen in, or did he come to see you a-purpose?"

"He — I believe he came to see me. Then he and I —"

"Heave to again! He didn't come to see you to beg the favor of buyin' goods of you, 'tain't likely. Jim Jacobs, answer me straight. There's somethin' else. That feller wants somethin' of you — or of us. Now what is it?"

He hesitated some more. Then he upset the woodpile and let out the darky.

"Well," he says, "I'll tell you. I was goin' to tell you, anyway. Frank's all right. He's got a good idea and he's got the experience to put it into practice; but he's somethin' the way old Beanblossom was afore you took a share in this store — he needs a little more capital."

I swung round on the settee and looked him square in the eye.

"I — see," I says, slow. "Now — I see! He's after money and he wants us to lend it to him. I might have guessed it. Well, did you say no right off? or was you waitin' to have me say it? You might have said it yourself. You knew I'd back you up."

Would you believe it? he got as red as a beet.

"I didn't say anything," he says. "Don't go off half-cocked like that. What's the matter with you this mornin'? He don't want to borrer money. He wants more capital in the proposition — wants to float it right. And he's been inquirin' around and has found that you and me are the two leadin' business men in the place and has come to us first. It's more a favor on his part than anything else. He offers to let us have a third interest between us; you put in a thousand and I do the same. Why, man, it's a cinch! It's a chance that don't come every day. As I told you, I've had the same notion in my head for a long time. A summer dinin'-room like that in this town is —"

"Wait!" I interrupted. "What do you know about this Frank critter? Where'd he come from? Who is he?"

"He comes from Pittsburg. That's the last place he was in. And he's got his pockets full of references and testimonials."

"Humph! Anybody can get testimonials. Write 'em himself, if there wa'n't any other way. I had a second mate once with more testimonials than shirts, enough sight, and he —"

"Oh, cut it out! Besides, I don't care where he comes from. He's sharp as a steel trap; that much I can tell with one eye shut. And he's run dinin'-rooms and hotels; that I'll bet my hat on. That's

all we need to know. A road-house in this town is a twenty per cent. proposition durin' the summer months. It's the chance of a lifetime, I tell you."

"Maybe so. But how do you know the feller's honest?"

"I don't care whether he's honest or not. It doesn't make any difference. If I wa'n't here to keep my eye peeled, it might be; but I'll be here and if he gets ahead of me, he'll be movin' to some extent. Someone else'll grab the chance if we don't. I'm for it. What do you say?"

I shook my head. "Jim," says I, "I can see where you stand. You're so dead sartin that an eatin'-house of that kind'll pay big, that you're blind to the rest of it. Now I don't pretend to be a judge of human nature like you — leavin' out Injun and Rosenstein human nature, of course — nor a doctor of sick businesses, which is your profession. But my experience is —"

He stood up and sniffed impatient.

"Cut it out, I tell you!" he says, again. "This ain't an experience meetin'. Will you take a flyer with me in that road-house, or won't you?"

"Way I feel now, I won't," says I, prompt.

He turned on his heel, took a step towards the door and then stopped.

"Well," he says, "you think it over till to-morrer mornin' and then let me know. Only, you mark my

words, it's a chance. And, with me to keep my eye on it, there's no risk at all."

So that's the way it ended that day. And half that night I laid awake, feelin' meaner'n dirt to say no to as good a partner as I had, and yet pretty average sure I was right, just the same.

In the mornin' my mind was still betwixt and between. I went down to the store and walked back to the post-office department. I looked in through the little window and saw Mary Blaisdell inside, sortin' the outgoin' letters. The sunshine, streamin' in from outside, lit up her hair till it looked like one of them halos in a church picture. Seems to me I never saw her look prettier; but then, every time I saw her I thought the same thing. A good-lookin' woman and a good woman — yes, and capable. That she'd lived so many years without gettin' married, was one of the things that made a feller lose confidence in the good-sense of humans. The chap that got her would be lucky. Then I caught a glimpse of myself in the lookin'-glass where customers tried on hats, and decided I'd better stop thinkin' foolishness or somebody would catch me at it and send me to the comic papers.

"Mornin', Mary," says I. "Has Mr. Jacobs come aboard yet?"

She turned and came to her side of the window.

"Yes," she says, "he was here. He's gone out

now with that Mr. Frank. I believe they've gone up to the old Higgins Place."

"Um-hm," says I. "Well, Mary, just between friends, I'd like to ask you somethin'. Do you like that Frank man's looks?"

She wa'n't expectin' that and she didn't know how to answer for a jiffy. Then she kind of half laughed, and says: "No, Cap'n Zeb, since you ask me, I — I don't. I don't like him. And I haven't any good reason, either."

I nodded. "Much obliged, Mary," says I. "And, since you ain't asked me, I'll tell you that *I* don't like him. And my reason's about as good as yours. Maybe it's his clothes. A man, 'cordin' to my notion, has a right to look like a horse jockey, if he wants to; and he's got a right to look like an undertaker. But when he looks like a combination of the two, I — well, I get skittish and begin to shy, that's all. It's too much as if he was baited to trap you dead or alive."

Then Jim Henry come in and when, an hour or so later, he got me one side and asked me if I'd made up my mind about investin' in Frank's road-house, I answered prompt that my mind was made up and the answer was still no. He was disapp'inted, I could see that, and pretty mad.

"Humph!" says he. "Skipper, you're all right except for one fault — you're as 'country' as they

make 'em, and they make 'em pretty narrer sometimes. Well, you've had the chance. Don't ever tell me you haven't."

"I won't," says I, and we didn't mention the subject for a long time. Then — but that comes later. However, I judged that Frank had found folks in Ostable who wa'n't as narrer and "country" as I was, for, inside of a week, the carpenters was busy on the Higgins Place. They built on great, wide piazzas; they knocked out partitions between rooms; they made the house pretty much over. In March loads of fancy furniture came from Boston. At last a windmill three feet high — made to look like a little copy of the old Cape windmills our great-granddads used to grind grist in, with sails that turned — was set up in the front yard, and on a post by the big gate was swingin' a fancy notice board, with a gilt windmill painted on that, and the words in big letters:

THE SIGN OF THE WINDMILL.

MEALS AT ALL HOURS.

STEAKS, CHOPS, GAME, ETC.
TABLE D'HOTE DINNER EACH DAY AT 1.15.

Special Accommodations for Auto Parties.

That was it, you see. "The Sign of the Windmill" was the name of the new road-house.

But that wa'n't all the advertisin', by a consider'ble sight. There was signs all up and down the main roads, with hands p'intin' in the "Windmill" direction. And there was ads in the Cape papers and in the Boston papers, too. I swan, I didn't believe anybody but Jim Henry Jacobs could have engineered such advertisin'! And there was a black-lookin' critter with the ends of his mustache waxed so sharp you could have sewed canvas with 'em — he was the French chef — and three foreign waiters, and a dark-complected fleshy woman who seemed to be a sort of general assistant manager and stewardess, and — and — goodness knows what there wa'n't. There was so many kinds of hired help that I couldn't see where Frank himself come in — unless he was the spare "windmill," which, judgin' by his gift of gab, I cal'late might be the fact.

"The Sign of the Windmill" bought all its groceries and general supplies at the store, which, considerin' that we'd turned down the "chance" to be part owners, seemed sort of odd to me, 'cause Frank didn't look like a feller who'd forgive a slight like that. But I judged Jim Henry had hypnotized him, as he done other difficult customers, and so I said nothin'. The auto season opened and our weekly

bills with that road-house was big ones, but they was paid every week, and I hadn't any kick there, either.

As for the business that dinin'-room done, it was surprisin', particularly Saturdays and Sundays, when there'd be twenty or more autos in the front yard and more a-comin'. The table d'hote dinner at 1.15 was so well patronized that folks had to wait their turns at table and later, on moonlight nights, the old house was all lighted up and you could hear the noise of dishes rattlin' and the laughin' and singin' till after eleven o'clock. And our bills with the "Sign of the Windmill" kept gettin' bigger and bigger.

But though the auto parties was thick and the patronage good, still there was some dissatisfaction, I found out. One big car stopped at the store on a Saturday afternoon and the boss of it talked with me while the women folks was inside buyin' post-cards and such.

"Well," says I, to the owner of the car, a big, fleshy, good-natured chap he was, "well," says I, "I cal'late you've all had a good dinner. Feed you fust-class up there at the Windmill place, don't they?"

He sniffed. "Humph!" says he, "the food's all right. It ought to be, at the price. Is the proprietor of that hotel named Allie Baby?"

"Allie which?" I says, laughin'. "No, no, his

name's Frank. Edwin George Eben etcetery Frank. What made you think 'twas Allie?"

"'Cause he's a close connection of the Forty Thieves," he says, sharp. "He'd take a prize in the hog class at a county fair, that chap would. What's the matter with him? Does he think he's runnin' a get-rich-quick shop? Two weeks ago I paid a dollar and a half for a dinner there, and that was seventy-five cents too much. Now he's jumped to two-fifty and the feed ain't a bit better."

"Two dollars and a half for a *dinner!*" says I. "Whew! The cost of livin' *is* goin' up, ain't it? What do they give you? Canary birds' tongues on toast? Any shore dinner ever I see could be cooked for—"

He interrupted. "Shore dinner nothin'!" he snorts. "I wouldn't kick at the price if I got a good shore dinner. But what we got here is a poor imitation of a country Waldorf. Everybody's kickin', but we all go there because it's the best we can find for twenty miles. However, I hear another place is to be started in Denboro and if *that* makes good, your Forty Thief friend will have to haul in his horns. He'll never get another cent from me, or a hundred others I know, who have been his best customers. We're all waitin' to give him the shake and it looks as if we should be able to do it. We motorin' fellers stick together and, if the word's

passed along the line, the "Sign of the Windmill" will be a dead one, mark my words."

I marked 'em, and when, by and by, I heard that the Denboro dinin'-room was open and doin' a good business, I underscored the mark.

This was about the middle of June. A week later Jim Henry got the telegram about his younger brother out in Colorado bein' sick and wantin' to see him bad. He hated to go, but he felt he had to, so he went.

I said good-by to him up at the depot and told him not to worry a mite. "I'll look out for everything," I says. "Course I'll miss you at the store, but I'll write you every day or so and keep you posted, and you can give me business prescriptions by mail."

"That's all right, Skipper," says he, "I know the store'll be took care of. But there's one thing that — that —"

"What's the one thing?" I asked. "Overboard with it. My shoulders are broad and I won't mind totin' another hogshead or so."

He hesitated and it seemed to me that he looked troubled. But finally he said he'd guessed 'twas nothin' that amounted to nothin' anyway and he'd be back in a couple of weeks sure. So off he went and I had a sort of Robinson Crusoe desert island feelin' that lasted all that day and night.

It lasted longer than that, too. I didn't hear from him for ten days. Then I got a note sayin' his brother had scarlet fever — which seemed a fool disease for a grown-up man to have — and was pretty sick. I wrote to him for the land sakes to be careful he didn't get it himself, and the next news I heard was from a doctor sayin' he *had* got it. After that the bulletins was infrequent and alarmin'.

I'd have put for Colorado in a minute, but I couldn't; that store was on my shoulders and I couldn't leave. I telegraphed not to spare no expense and to write or wire every day. 'Twas all I could do, but I never spent such a worried time afore nor since. I was worried, not only about my partner, but about the business he'd put in my charge. There was new developments in that business and they kept on developin'.

'Twas the " Sign of the Windmill " that was troublin' me. As I told you, the weekly bills for that eatin'-house was big ones, but the fust three or four had been paid on the dot. Now, however, they wa'n't paid and they was just as big. Frank's account on our books kept gettin' larger and larger and, not only that, but anybody could see that the Windmill wa'n't doin' half the trade it begun with. There was more auto parties than ever, but the heft of 'em went right on by to the new road-house in Denboro. I remembered what the fleshy man told

me and I judged that the word had been passed to the motorin' crew, just as he prophesied.

I went up to see Frank and had a talk with him. I found him in his office, settin' at a fine new roll-top desk, with the dark-complected stewardess alongside of him. She seemed to be helpin' him with his letters and accounts, which looked odd to me, and she glowered at me when I come in like a cat at a stray poodle. She didn't get up and go out, neither, till he hinted p'raps she'd better, and even then she whispered to him mighty confidential afore she went. 'Twas a queer way for hired help to act, but 'twa'n't none of my affairs, of course.

He was cordial enough till he found out what I was after and then he chilled up like a freezer full of cream. He was in the habit of payin' his bills, he give me to understand, and he'd pay this one when 'twas convenient. If I didn't care to sell the Windmill goods, that was my affair, of course, but his relations with my partner had been so pleasant that — and so forth and so on. I sneaked out of that office, feelin' like a henroost-thief instead of an honest man tryin' to collect an honest debt. I'd bungled things again. Instead of makin' matters better, I'd made 'em worse; come nigh losin' a good customer and all that. What business had an old salt herrin' like me to be in business, anyhow? That's how I felt when I was talkin' to him, and how I felt

when I shut that office door and come out into the dinin'-room.

But the sight of that dinin'-room, tables all vacant, and two waiters where there had been four, fetched all my uneasiness back again. If ever a place had "Goin' down" marked on it 'twas the "Sign of the Windmill." I stewed and fretted all the way to the store and when I got there I found that another big order of groceries and canned goods had been delivered to the eatin' house while I was gone.

The next week'll stick in my mind till doomsday, I cal'late. Every blessed mornin' found me vowin' I'd stop sellin' that Windmill, and every night found more dollars added to the bill. You see, I didn't know what to do. If I'd been sole owner and sailin' master, I'd have set my foot down, I guess; but there was Jim Henry to be considered. I wrote a note to the Frank man, but he didn't even trouble to answer it.

Saturday noon came round and, after the mail was sorted, I wandered out to the front platform and set there, blue as a whetstone. The gang of summer boarders and natives, that's always around mail times, melted away fast and I was pretty nigh alone. Not quite alone; Alpheus Perkins, the fish man, was occupyin' moorin's at t'other end of the platform and he didn't seem to be in any hurry. By and by over he comes and sets down alongside of me.

"Cap'n Zeb," he says, fidgety like, "I s'pose likely you've been wonderin' why I don't pay your bill here at the store, ain't you?"

I hadn't, havin' more important things to think about, but now I remembered that he did owe consider'ble and had owed it for some time. Alpheus is as straight as they make 'em and usually pays his debts prompt.

"I know you must have," he went on, not waitin' for me to answer. "Well, I intended to pay long afore this, and I will pay pretty soon. But I've had trouble collectin' my own debts and it's held me back. If I could only get my hands on one account that's owin' me, I'd be all right. Say," says he, tryin' hard to act careless and as if 'twa'n't important one way or t'other: "Say," he says, "you know Mr. Frank, up here at the hotel, pretty well, don't you?"

For a minute or so I didn't answer. Then I knocked the ashes out of my pipe and says I, "Why, yes. I know him. What of it?"

"Oh, nothin' much," he says. "Only I was told he was a partic'lar friend of yours and Mr. Jacobs's and — and —"

"Who told you he was our partic'lar friend?" I asked.

"Why, he did. I was up there yesterday, just hintin' I could use a check on account. Not pressin' the matter nor tryin' to be hard on him, you under-

stand; course he's all right; but I was mighty short of ready cash and so —"

"Hold on, Al!" I said, quick. "Wait! Does the 'Sign of the Windmill' owe you a bill?"

"Pretty nigh a hundred dollars," says he. "I've supplied 'em with fish and lobsters and clams and such ever since they started. Fust month they paid me by the week. After that —"

"Good heavens and earth!" I sung out. "My soul and body! And — and, when you asked for it, this — this Frank man told you he'd pay you when 'twas convenient, same as he paid Jacobs and me, who was his friends and was quite ready to do business that way."

He actually jumped, I'd surprised him so.

"Hey?" he sung out. "Zeb Snow, be you a second-sighter? How did you know he told me that?"

I drew a long breath. "It didn't take second sight for that," I says. "I was up there last Monday and he told me the same thing, only 'twas you and Ed Cahoon who was his friends then."

He let that sink in slow.

"My godfreys domino!" he groaned. "My godfreys! He — he told — Why! why, he must be workin' the same game on all hands!"

"Looks like it," says I, and, thinkin' of Jim Henry, poor feller, sick as he could be, and the busi-

ness he'd left me to look out for, my heart went down into my boots.

Perkins set thinkin' for a jiffy. Then he got up off the settee.

"The son of a gun!" he says. "I'll fix him! I'll put my bill in a lawyer's hands to-night."

"No, you won't," I sung out, grabbin' him by the arm. "You mustn't. He owes the Ostable Store four times what he owes you, and it's likely he owes Cahoon and a lot more. The rest of us can't afford to let you upset the calabash that way. You might get yours, though I'm pretty doubtful, but where would the rest of us come in. You set down, Alpheus. Set down, and let me think. Set down, I tell you!"

When I talk that way — it's an old seafarin' habit — most folks usually obey orders. Alpheus set. He started to talk, but I hushed him up and, havin' filled my pipe and got it to goin', I smoked and thought for much as five minutes.

"Hum!" says I, after the spell was over, "the way I sense it is like this: This ain't any fo'mast hand's job; and it ain't a skipper's job neither. It's a case for all hands and the ship's cat, workin' together and standin' by each other. We've got to find out who's who and what's what, make up our minds and then all read the lesson in concert, like young ones in school. This Frank Windmill critter owes you and he owes me; we're sartin of that.

More'n likely he owes Ed Cahoon for chickens and fowls and eggs, and Bill Bangs for milk, and Henry Hall for ice, and land knows how many more. S'pose you skirmish around and find out who he does owe and fetch all the creditors to the store here to-morrer mornin' at eleven o'clock. It'll be church time, I know, but even the parson will excuse us for this once, 'specially as the 'Sign of the Windmill' is supposed to sell liquor and he's down on it."

We had consider'ble more talk, but that was the way it ended, finally. I went to bed that night, but it didn't take; I might as well have set up, so fur's sleep was concerned. All I could think of was poor, sick Jim Henry and the trust he put in me.

CHAPTER XI

COOKS AND CROOKS

I WAS at the store by quarter of eleven, but the gang of creditors was there to meet me, seven of 'em altogether. Cahoon, the chicken man, and Bangs, the milk man, and Hall, the ice man, and Alpheus, and Caleb Bearse, who'd been supplyin' meat to that road-house, and Peleg Doane, who'd done carpenterin' and repairs on it, and Jeremiah Doane, his brother, who'd painted the repaired places. Seven was all the creditors Perkins could scare up on short notice, though he cal'lated there was more.

"There's one more, anyway," says Bill Bangs. "That dark-complected woman — the one you call the stewardess, Cap'n Zeb — was sick a spell ago and Frank told Doctor Goodspeed he'd be responsible for the bill. I see the doc this mornin' and he's with us. Says he may be down later."

They elected me chairman of the meetin' and we started deliberatin'. The debts amounted to quite a lot, though the Ostable Store's was the biggest. Some was for doin' one thing and some another, but

we all agreed we must see Colcord, the lawyer, afore we did much of anything. While we was still pow-wowin', somebody knocked at the door. 'Twas Doctor Goodspeed, on the way to see a patient.

"Well," says he, "how's the consultation comin' on? Judgin' by your faces, I should imagine 'twas a autopsy. Time to take desperate measures, if you asked *me*. I never did believe that Frank chap was anything but a crook, so I'm not surprised. I'm with you in spirit, boys, though I can't stop. However, here's a couple of pieces of information which may interest you: One is that 'The Sign of the Windmill's' account was overdrawn yesterday at the bank and the bank folks sent notice. T'other is that Lawyer Colcord is out of town for a couple of days, so you can't get him. Otherwise than that, the patient is normal. By, by. Life's a giddy jag of joy, isn't it?"

He grinned and shut the door with a bang. The eight of us looked at each other. Then Alpheus Perkins riz to his feet.

"Humph!" says he. "Account overdrawn, hey? Well, maybe that Windmill ain't made enough to pay its bills, but it's been takin' in consider'ble cash. If it ain't at the bank, where is it? I'm goin' to find out. And if I can't get a lawyer to help me, I'll do without one. That Frank critter's store clothes are wuth somethin', and, if I can't

get nothin' more, I'll rip *them* right off his back. So long, fellers. Keep your ear to the ground and you'll hear somethin' drop."

He headed for the door, but he didn't go alone. The rest of us got there at the same time, and I — well, I wouldn't wonder if 'twas me that opened it. I was desperate, and I've commanded vessels in my time.

Anyhow, 'twas me that led the procession up the front steps of the "Sign of the Windmill" and into the dinin'-room. The two waiters was busy. They had five of the tables set end to end and covered with cloths, and they was layin' plates and knives and forks for a big crowd. 'Twas plain that special customers was expected.

"Mr. Frank in his office?" says I, headin' for the skipper's cabin. The waiters looked at each other and jabbered in some sort of foreign lingo.

"No, sare," says one of 'em. "No, sare. Meester Frank, he is away — out."

"Away out, hey?" says I. "You're wrong, son. We're the ones that are out, but we ain't goin' to be out another cent's wuth. Come on, boys, we'll find him."

You can see I was mighty mad, or I wouldn't have been so reckless. I walked acrost that dinin'-room and flung open the office door. Frank himself wa'n't there, but who should be settin' at his roll-top desk,

but the fleshy, dark-complected stewardess woman. She glowered at me, ugly as a settin' hen.

"This is a private room," she snaps.

"I know, ma'am," says I; "but the business we've come on is sort of private, too. Come in, boys."

The seven of 'em come in and they filled that office plumb full. The stewardess woman's black eyes opened and then shut part way. But there was fire between the lashes.

"What do you mean by comin' in here?" says she. "And what do you want?"

The rest of the fellers looked at me, so I answered.

"Ma'am," says I, "we don't want nothin' of you and we're sorry to trouble you. We've come to see Mr. Frank on a matter of business, important business — that is, it's important to us."

"Mr. Frank is out," says she. "You must call again. Good day."

She turned back again to the desk, but none of us moved.

"Out, is he?" says I. "Well then, I cal'late we'll wait till he comes in."

"He is out of town. He won't be in till to-morrer," she snaps.

I looked 'round at the rest of the crowd. Every one of 'em nodded.

"Well, then, ma'am," I says, "I cal'late we'll stay here and wait till to-morrer."

That shook her. She got up from the desk and turned to face us. If I'm any judge of a temper she had one, and she was holdin' it in by main strength.

"You may tell me your business," she says. "I am Mr. Frank's — er — secretary."

So I told her. "We've waited for our money long as we can," says I. "None of us are well-off and every one of us needs what's owin' him. We've called and we've wrote. Now we're goin' to stay here till we're paid. Of course, ma'am, I realize 'tain't none of your affairs, and we ain't goin' to make you any more trouble than we can help. We'll just set down on the piazza or in the dinin'-room or somewheres and wait for your boss, that's all."

I said that, 'cause I didn't want her to think we had anything against her personal. I cal'lated 'twould smooth her down, but it didn't. She looked as if she'd like to murder us, every livin' soul.

"You get out of here!" she screamed, her hands openin' and shuttin'. "You get right out of here this minute!"

"Yes, ma'am," says I, "we'll get out of your office, of course. Further'n that you'll have to excuse us. We're goin' to stay right in this house till we see Mr. Frank."

"I'll put you out!" she sputtered. "I'll have the waiters put you out."

I thought of them two puny lookin' waiters and, to save me, I couldn't help smilin'. You'd think she'd have seen the ridic'lous side of it, too, but apparently she didn't, for she bust right through between Alpheus and me and rushed into the dinin'-room.

"Boys," says I, to the crowd, "maybe we'd better step out of here. We may need more room."

She was in the dinin'-room talkin' foreign language in a blue streak to the waiters. They was lookin' scared and spreadin' out their hands and hunchin' their shoulders.

"Ma'am," says I, "if I was you I wouldn't do nothin' foolish. We ain't goin' and we won't be put out, but, on the other hand, we won't make any fuss. We'll just set down here and wait for the boss, that's all. Set down, boys."

So all hands come to anchor on chairs around that dinin'-room and grinned and looked silly but determined. The stewardess glared at us some more and then rushed off upstairs. In a minute she was back with her hat on.

"You wait!" says she. "You just wait! I'll put you in prison! I'll — Oh —" The rest of it was French or Italian or somethin', but we didn't need an interpreter. She shook her fists at us and run down the front steps and away up the road.

"Well, gents all," says I, "man born of woman

is of few days and full of trouble. To-day we're here and to-morrer we're in jail, as the sayin' is. Anybody want to back out? Now's the accepted time."

Nobody backed. The two waiters went on with their table settin' and we set and watched 'em. 'Twas the queerest Sunday mornin' ever I put in. By and by Alpheus got uneasy and wandered away out towards the kitchen. In a few minutes back he comes, b'ilin' mad.

"Say, fellers," he sung out. "Do you know what's goin' on here? There's a party of thirty folks comin' in automobiles for dinner. They're gettin' the dinner ready now. And if we don't stop 'em, they'll be fed with our stuff, the grub we've never got a cent for. I don't know how you feel, but *I've* got ten dollar's wuth of clams and lobsters in this eatin'-house that ain't goin' to be used unless I get my pay for 'em. You can do as you please, but I'm goin' to stay in that kitchen and watch them lobsters and things."

And out he put, headed for the kitchen. The rest of us looked at each other. Then Caleb Bearse rose to his feet.

"Well," says he, determined, "there's a lot of chops and roastin' beef and steaks out aft here that belong to me. None of *them* go to feed auto folks unless I get my pay fust."

And *he* started for the kitchen. Then up gets Ed Cahoon and follers suit.

"I've got six or eight fowl and some eggs aboard this craft," he says. "I cal'late I'll keep 'em company."

The rest of us never said nothin', but I presume likely we all thought alike. Anyhow, inside of three minutes we was all out in that kitchen and facin' as mad a chief cook and bottle washer as ever hailed from France or anywheres else. You see, 'twas time to put the lobsters and clams and all the rest of the truck on the fire and we wa'n't willin' to see 'em put there.

The chief or "chef," or whatever they called him, fairly hopped up and down. The madder he got the less English he talked and the less everybody else understood. Bill Bangs done most of the talkin' for our side and he had the common idea that to make foreigners understand you must holler at 'em. Some of the other fellers put in their remarks to help along, all hollerin' too, and such a riot you never heard outside of a darky camp-meetin'. While the exercises was at their liveliest the telephone bell rung. After it had rung five times I went into the other room to answer it. When I got back to that kitchen I got Alpheus to one side and says I:

"Al," I says, "this thing's gettin' more inter-

estin' every minute. That telephone call was from the man that's ordered the big dinner here to-day. There's thirty-two in his party and they've got as far as Cohasset Narrows already. They'll be here in an hour and a half. He 'phoned just to let me know they was on the way."

"Humph!" says he. "What did he say when you told him there wouldn't be no dinner?"

"He didn't say nothin'," says I, "because I didn't tell him. The wire was a bad one and he couldn't hear plain, so he lost patience and rung off. Said I could tell him whatever I wanted to say when him and his party got here. *I* don't want to tell him anything. You can explain to thirty-two hungry folks that there's nothin' doin' in the grub line, if you want to — I don't."

"Humph!" he says again. "I ain't hankerin' for the job. What had we better do, Cap'n Zeb, do you think?"

"Well," says I, "I cal'late we'd better shorten sail and haul out of the race, for a spell, anyhow. At any rate we'd better clear out of this kitchen and leave that chef and the rest to get the dinner. I know it's our stuff that'll go to make that dinner, but I don't see's we can help it. A few dollars more won't break us more'n we're cracked already."

But he waved his hand for me to stop. "No question of a few dollars is in it. It's no use," he

says, solemn; "you're too late. The Frenchman's quit."

"Quit?" says I.

"Um-hm," says he. "Bill Bangs told him that we fellers had took charge of this road-house and he and the rest of the kitchen help quit right then and there. They're out in the barn now, holdin' counsel of war, I shouldn't wonder. Bill seems to think he's done a great piece of work, but I don't."

I didn't either; and, after I'd hot-footed it to the barn and tried to pump some reason and sense into that chef and his gang, I was surer of it than ever. They wouldn't listen to reason, not from us. They wanted to see the boss, meanin' Mr. Frank. He was the one that had hired 'em and they wouldn't have anything to say to anybody else.

I come back to the kitchen and found the boys all settin' round lookin' pretty solemn. My joke about the jail wa'n't half so funny as it had been. Bill Bangs, who'd been the most savage outlaw of us all, was the meekest now.

"Say, Cap'n," he says to me, nervous like, "hadn't we better clear out and go home? I don't want to see them auto people when they get here. And — and I'm scared that that stewardess has gone after the sheriff."

"I presume likely that's just where she's gone," says I.

"Wh-what'll we do?" says he.

"Don't know," says I. "But I do know that the time for backin' out is past and gone. We started out to be pirates and now it's too late to haul down the skull and cross-bones. We've got to stand by our guns and fight to the finish, that's all I see. If the rest of you have got anything better to offer, I, for one, would be mighty glad to hear it."

Everybody looked at everybody else, but nobody said anything. 'Twas a glum creditors' meetin', now I tell you. We set and stood around that kitchen for ten minutes; then we heard voices in the dinin'-room.

"Heavens and earth!" sings out Ed Cahoon. "Who's that? It can't be the automobile gang so soon!"

It wa'n't. 'Twas a parcel of women. You see, some of the crowd had told their wives about the counsel at the store and that, more'n likely, we'd pay a visit to the "Sign of the Windmill." Church bein' over, they'd come to hunt us up. There was Alpheus's wife, and Cahoon's, and Bangs's, and Bearse's, and Jerry Doane's daughter, and Mary Blaisdell. They was mighty excited and wanted to know what was up. We told 'em, but we didn't hurrah none while we was doin' it.

"Well," says Matildy Bangs, "I must say you

men folks have made a nice mess of it all. William Bangs, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. What'll I do when you're in state's prison? How'm I goin' to get along, I'd like to know! You never think of nobody but yourself."

Poor Bill was about ready to cry, but this made him mad. "Who would I think of, for thunder sakes!" he sung out. "I'm the one that's goin' to be jailed, ain't I?"

Then Mary Blaisdell took me by the arm. Her eyes were sparklin' and she looked excited.

"Cap'n Snow," she whispered, "come here a minute. I want to speak to you. I have an idea."

"Lord!" says I, groanin', "I wish *I* had. What is it?"

What do you suppose 'twas? Why, that we, ourselves, should get up the dinner for the auto folks. Every woman there could cook, she said, and so could some of the men. We'd seized the stuff for the dinner already. It was ours, or, at any rate, it hadn't been paid for.

"We can get 'em a good dinner," says she. "I know we can. And, if that Frank doesn't come back until you have been paid, you can take that much out of his bills. If he does come no one will be any worse off, not even he. Let's do it."

I looked at her. As she said, we wouldn't be any worse off, and we might as well be hung for old

sheep as lamb. The auto folks would be better off; they'd have some kind of a meal, anyhow.

We had a grand confab, but, in the end, that's what we done. Every one of them women could cook plain food, and Mrs. Cahoon was the best cake and pie maker in the county. We divided up the job. All hands had somethin' to do, includin' me, who undertook a clam chowder, and Bill Bangs, who split wood and lugged water and cussed and groaned about state's prison while he was doin' it.

The last thing was ready and the last plate set when the autos, six of 'em, purred and chugged up to the front door. We expected Frank, or the stewardess, or the constable, or all three of 'em, any minute, but they hadn't showed up. The dinner crowd piled in and set down at the tables and the head man of 'em, the one who was givin' the party, come over to see me. And who should he turn out to be but the stout man I'd met at the store. The one who had told me he'd been waitin' for a chance to get even with Frank. I don't know which was the most surprised to meet each other in that place, he or I.

"Hello!" says he. "What are you doin' here? You joined the Forty Thieves? Where's the boss robber?"

I told him the boss was out; that there was some complications that would take too long to explain.

"But, at any rate," says I, "you're meal's ready, and that's the main thing, ain't it?"

"Yes," says he, "it is. I've got a crowd of New York men — business associates of mine and their wives — down for the week end and I wanted to give 'em a Cape dinner. I never would have come here, but the Denboro place is full up and couldn't take us in. I hope the dinner is a better one than the last I had in this place."

I told him not to expect too much, but to set and be thankful for whatever he got. He didn't understand, of course, but he set down and we commenced servin' the dinner.

We started in with Little Neck quahaugs and followed them up with my clam chowder. Then we jogged along with bluefish and hot biscuit and creamed potatoes. After them come the lobsters and corn and such. Eat! You never see anybody stow food the way those New Yorkers did.

In the middle of the lobster doin's I bent over my fleshy friend and asked him if things was satisfactory. He looked up with his mouth full.

"Great Scott!" says he. "Cap'n, this is the best feed I've had since I first struck the Cape, and that was ten years ago. What's happened to this hotel? Is it under new management?"

I didn't feel like grinnin', but I couldn't help it.

"Yes," says I, "it is — for the time bein'."

The final layer we loaded that crowd up with was blueberry dumplin' and they washed it down with coffee. Then the fat man — his name was Johnson — hauled out cigars and the males lit and started puffin'. I went out to the kitchen to see how things was goin' there.

Mary Blaisdell, with a big apron tied over her Sunday gown, was washin' dishes. Her sleeves was rolled up, her hair was rumpled, and she looked pretty enough to eat — at least, I shouldn't have minded tryin'.

"How was it?" she asked. "Are they satisfied?"

"If they ain't they ought to be," says I. "And to-morrer the dyspepsy doctors'll do business enough to give us a commission. But where's our old college chum, the chef, and the waiters and all?"

"They're in the barn," says she. "They tried to come in here and make trouble, but Mr. Perkins wouldn't let 'em. He drove 'em back to the barn again. But they're dreadfully cross."

"I shouldn't wonder," I says. "Well, goodness knows what'll come of this, Mary, but —"

Bill Bangs interrupted me. He come tearin' out of the dinin'-room, white as a new tops'l, and his eyes pretty close to poppin' out of his head.

"My soul!" he panted. "Oh, my soul, Cap'n Zeb! They're comin'! they're comin'!"

"Who's comin'?" I wanted to know.

"Why, Mr. Frank, and that stewardess! And John Bean, the constable, is with 'em. What shall I do? I'll have to go to jail!"

He was all but cryin', like a young one. I left him to his wife, who, judgin' by her actions, was cal'latin' to soothe him with a pan of hot water, and headed for the front porch. However, I was too late. I hadn't any more than reached the dinin'-room, where all the comp'ny was still settin' at the tables, than in through the front door marches Mr. Edwin Frank of Pittsburg, and the stewardess, and John Bean, the constable. The band had begun to play and 'twas time to face the music.

Frank looked around at the crowd at the tables, at Mrs. Cahoon, and Alpheus, and the rest who'd done the waitin'; and then at me. His face was fire red and he was ugly as a shark in a weir net.

"Humph!" says he. "What does this mean? Snow, what high-handed outrage have you committed on these premises?"

I held up my hand. "Shh!" says I, tryin' to think quick and save a scene; "Shh, Mr. Frank!" I says. "If you'll come into your private cabin I'll explain best I can. Somebody had to get dinner for this crowd. Your Frenchmen wouldn't work, so we did. All we've used is our grub, that which ain't been paid for, and—"

His teeth snapped together and he was so mad he couldn't speak for a second. The stewardess was as mad as he was, but it took more'n that to keep her quiet.

"Fred," says she — and even then, upset as I was, I noticed she didn't call him by the name he give Jacobs and me —"Fred, have him arrested. He's the one that's responsible for it all. Officer, you do your duty. Arrest that Snow there! Do you hear?"

She was pointin' to me. Poor old Bean hadn't arrested anybody for so long that he'd forgot how, I cal'late. All he did was stammer and look silly.

"Cap'n Zeb," he says, "I — I'm dreadful sorry, but — but —"

Then *he* was interrupted. A big, tall, gray-haired chap, who was settin' about amidships of the table, got to his feet.

"Just a minute, Officer," says he, quiet, and never lettin' go of his cigar, "just a minute, please. The — er — lady and gentleman you have with you are old acquaintances of mine. Hello, Francis! I'm very glad to see you. We've missed you at the Conquilquit Club. This meetin' is unexpected, but not the less pleasant."

He was talkin' to the Frank man. And the Frank man — well, you should have seen him! The red went out of his face and he almost flopped over onto

the floor. The stewardess went white, too, and she grabbed his arm with both hands.

"My Lord!" she says, in a whisper like, "it's Mr. Washburn!"

"Correct, Hortense," says the gray-haired man. "You haven't forgotten me, I see. Flattered, I'm sure."

For just about ten seconds the three of 'em looked at each other. Then Frank made a jump for the door and the woman with him. They was out and down the steps afore poor old Bean could get his brains to workin'.

"Stop 'em!" shouts Washburn. "Officer, don't let 'em get away!"

But they'd got away already. By the time we'd reached the porch they was in the buggy they'd come in and flyin' down the road in a cloud of dust.

I wiped my forehead.

"Well!" says I, "*well!*"

Johnson pushed through the excited bunch and took the gray-haired feller by the arm.

"Say, Wash," he says, "you're havin' too good a time all by yourself. Let us in on it, won't you? Your friends are goin' some; no use to run after them. Who are they?"

Washburn knocked the ashes from his cigar and smiled. He'd been cool as a no'thwest breeze right along.

"Well," he says, "the masculine member used to be called Fred Francis. He was steward of the Conquilquit Country Club on Long Island for some time. He cleared out a year ago with a thousand or so of the Club funds, and we haven't been able to trace him since. He was a first-class steward and sharp as a steel trap — but he was a crook. The woman — oh, she went with him. She is his wife."

CHAPTER XII

JIM HENRY STARTS SCREENIN'

A WHOLE month more went by afore Jim Henry Jacobs was well enough to come home. When he got off the train at the Ostable depot, thin and white and lookin' as if he'd been hauled through a knothole, I was waitin' for him. Maybe we wa'n't glad to see each other! We shook hands for pretty nigh five minutes, I cal'late. I loaded him into my buggy and drove him down to the Poquit House and took him upstairs to his room, which had been made as comf'table and cozy as it's possible to make a room in that kind of a boardin'-house.

He set down in a big chair and looked around him.

"By George, Skipper!" he says, fetchin' a long breath, "this is home, and I'm mighty glad to be here. Where'd all the flowers come from?"

"Mary is responsible for them," I told him. "She thought they'd sort of brighten up things."

"They do, all right," says he, grateful. "And now tell me about business. How is everything?"

I told him that everything was fine; trade was tip-top, and so on. He listened and was pleased, but I could see there was somethin' else on his mind.

"There's just one thing more," he said, soon's he got the chance. "I knew the store must be O. K.; your letters told me that. But — er — but —" tryin' hard to be casual and not too interested, "how is Frank doin' with his restaurant? How's the 'Sign of the Windmill' gettin' on?"

Then I told him the whole yarn, almost as I've told it here. He listened, breakin' out with exclamations and such every little while. When I got to where the Washburn man told who Frank and the stewardess was, he couldn't hold in any longer.

"A crook!" he sung out. "A crook! And she was his wife!"

"So it seems," says I. "And that ain't all of it, neither. You remember the doctor said he'd drawn his account out of the Ostable bank. Yes. Well, that account didn't amount to much; he'd used it about all, anyway. But there was another account in his wife's name at the Sandwich bank, and *that* was fairly good size."

"Did you get hold of that?" he asked, excited.

"No, we didn't. 'Twas in her name and we couldn't have touched it, if we'd wanted to; but we didn't get the chance. She drew it all the very next mornin' and the pair of 'em cleared out. I judge

they'd planned to skip in a few days anyhow, and our creditors' raid only hurried things up a little mite. The whole thing was a skin game — Frank and his precious wife had seen ruination comin' on and they'd laid plans to feather their own nest and let the rest of us whistle. We ain't seen 'em from that day to this."

He was shakin' all over. "You ain't?" he shouted, jumpin' from the chair. "You ain't? Why not? What did you let 'em get away for? Why didn't you set the police after 'em? What sort of managin' do you call that? I — I —"

"Hush!" says I, surprised to see him act so. "Hush, Jim! you ain't heard the whole of it yet. Our bill —"

"Bill be hanged!" he broke in. "I don't care a continental about the bill. I invested fifteen hundred dollars of my own money in that road-house, and you let that fakir get away with the whole of it. You're a nice partner!"

I was surprised now, and a good deal cut up and hurt. 'Twas an understandin' between us — not a written one, but an understandin' just the same — that neither should go into any outside deal without tellin' the other. We'd agreed to that after the row concernin' Taylor and the "Palace Parlors." So I was surprised and hurt and mad. But I held in well as I could.

"That's enough of that, Jim Henry!" says I. "I'll talk about that later. Now I'll tell you the rest of the yarn I started with. After that critter who called himself Frank, but whose name, it seemed, was Francis, had galloped away with the stewardess woman, there was consider'ble excitement around that dinin'-room, now I tell you. However, Johnson and Washburn and me managed to get together in the private office and I told 'em all about how we come to be there, and about our gettin' their dinner, and all the rest of it. They seemed to think 'twas funny, laughed liked a pair of loons, but I was a long ways from laughin'.

"'Well, well, well!' says Johnson, when I'd finished, 'that's the best joke I've heard in a month of Sundays. You sartinly have your own ways of doin' business down here, Cap'n Snow. But the dinner was a good one and I'll pay you for it now. How much?'

"'Well,' says I, 'I suppose I ought to get what I can for our crowd to leave with their wives and relations afore we're carted to jail. Course the meal we got for you wa'n't what you expected and I can't charge that Frank thief's price for it; but I've got to charge somethin'. If you think a dollar a head wouldn't be too much, I—'

"'A *dollar!*' says both of 'em. 'A dollar!'

"'Do you mean that's all you'll charge?' says

Johnson. 'A dollar for *that* dinner! It was the best —'

"'You bet it was!' says Washburn.

"'Look here!' goes on Johnson. 'I was to pay Frank, or whatever his real name is, two-fifty a plate. Yours was wuth three of any meal I ever got here, but, if you will be satisfied with the contract price I made with him, I'll give you a check now. And, Cap'n Snow, let me give you a piece of advice. Now you've got this hotel, keep it; keep it and run it. If you can furnish dinners like this one every day in the week durin' the summer and fall you'll have customers enough. Why, I'll engage twenty-five plates for next Sunday, myself. I've got another week-end party, haven't I, Wash?'

"'If you haven't I can get one for you,' says Washburn. 'Johnson's advice is good, Cap'n. Keep this place and run it yourself. Don't be afraid of Francis. Confound him! I ought to have him jailed. The Club would pitch me out if they knew I had the chance and didn't take it. But I won't, for your sake. So long as he doesn't trouble you I'll keep quiet. But if he *does* trouble you, if he ever comes back, just send for me. However, you won't have to send; he'll never come back.'

"And," says I, to Jim Henry, "he ain't ever come back. I talked the matter over with Mary and Alpheus and a few of the others and, after con-

sider'ble misgivin's on my part, we reached an agreement. I decided to run the 'Sign of the Windmill' myself. We bounced the chef and his helpers and the foreign waiters and hired Alpheus's wife and Cahoon's daughter and four or five more. We fed ten folks that next day and they all said they was comin' again. They did and they fetched others. The upshot of it is that all that hotel's outstandin' bills have been paid, the place is out of debt, and the outlook for next season is somethin' fine. There, Jim Henry, that's the yarn. I went through Purgatory because I figgered that you had trusted the store business in my hands and the Windmill's bill was so large and I thought I was responsible for it. If I'd known you'd put money into the shebang without tellin' me, your partner, a word about it, maybe I'd have felt worse. I *should* have felt worse — I do now — but in another way. I didn't think you'd do such a thing, Jim! I honestly didn't."

He'd set down while I was talkin'. Now he got up again.

"Skipper," he says, sort of broken, "I — I don't know what to say to you. I —"

"It's all right," says I, pretty sharp. "Your fifteen hundred's all right, I cal'late. The furniture and fixin's are wuth that, I guess. Is there anything else you want to ask me? If not I'm goin' to the store."

I was turnin' to go, but he stepped for'ard and stopped me.

"Zeb," he says, his face workin', "don't go away mad. I've been a chump. You ought to hate me, but I — I hope you won't. I was a fool. I thought because you was country that you hadn't any head for business, and when you wouldn't invest in that Windmill proposition I was sore and went into it myself. My conscience has plagued me ever since. I'm a low-down chump. I deserve to lose the fifteen hundred and I'm glad I did. By the Lord Harry! you've got more real business instinct than I ever dreamed of."

He looked so sort of weak and sick and pitiful that I was awful sorry for him, in spite of everything.

"Don't talk foolish," says I. "You ain't lost your money. It's yours now; at least I don't think Brother Fred George Eben Frank Francis'll ever turn up to claim it."

He shook his head. "Not much!" he says. "You don't suppose I'll take a share in that hotel, after you and your smart managin' saved it, do you? I ain't quite as mean as that, no matter what you think. No, sir, you've made good and the whole property is yours. All I want you to do is to give me another chance. If I live I'll show you how thankful I —"

"There! there!" says I, all upset, "don't say another word. Of course we'll hang together in this, same as in everything else. Shake, and let's forget it."

We shook hands and his was so thin and white I felt worse than ever.

"Skipper," he says, "I can't thank —"

"No need to thank me," I cut in. "If you've got to thank anybody, thank Mary Blaisdell. She's been the brains of that eatin'-house concern ever since I took hold of it. She's a wonder, that woman. If she'd been my own sister she couldn't have done more. I wish she was."

He looked at me, pretty queer.

"Skipper," says he, smilin', "if you wish that you're a bigger chump than I've been, and that's sayin' a heap."

What in the world he meant by that I didn't know — but I didn't ask him. Not that I didn't think. I'd been thinkin' a lot of foolish things lately, but you could have cut my head off afore I said 'em out loud, even to myself.

He came down to the store the next mornin' and the sight of it seemed to be the very tonic he needed. He got better day by day and pretty soon was his own brisk self again. "The Sign of the Windmill" — by the way, I'd changed the name on my own hook and 'twas the "Sign of the Bluefish" now —

done fust rate all through the fall and when we closed it we was sure that next summer it would be a little gold mine for us. In fact, everything in the trade line looked good, by-products and all, and I ought to have been a happy man. But I wa'n't exactly. Somehow or other I couldn't feel quite contented. I didn't know what was the matter with me and when I hinted as much to Jacobs he just looked at me and laughed.

"You're lonesome, that's what's the matter with you," he says. "You're too good a man to be boardin' at a one-horse ranch like the Poquit."

"I'll admit that," says I. "I'll give in that I'm next door to an angel and ought to wear wings, if it'll please you any to have me say so. And the Poquit ain't a paradise, by no means. But I've sailed salt water for the biggest part of my life and it ain't poor grub that ails me."

"Who said it was?" says he. "I said you were lonesome. You ought to have a home."

"Old Mans' Home you mean, I s'pose. Well, I ain't goin' there yet."

He laughed again and walked off.

In October he went up to Boston and came back with his head full of new ideas and his pockets full of notions. He'd been to what the advertisements called the Industrial Exhibition in Mechanics' Buildin' up there, and had fetched back every last

thing he could get for nothin' and some few that he bought cheap. He had a sample trap that, accordin' to the circular, would catch all the able-bodied rats in a township the fust night and make all the crippled and bedridden ones grieve themselves to death of disappointment because they couldn't get into it afore closin' hours. And he had the Gunners' Pocket Companion, which was a foldin' hatchet and butcher knife, with a corkscrew in the handle; and samples of "cereal coffee" that didn't taste like either cereal or coffee; and safety razors that were warranted not to cut — and wouldn't; and — and I don't know what all. These was side issues, however, as you might say. What he was really enthusiastic over was the Eureka Adjustable Aluminum Window Screen. If he'd been a mosquito he couldn't have been more anxious about them screens.

"They're the greatest ever, Skipper!" he says to me, enthusiastic. "Fit any window; can't rust — and a child of twelve can put 'em up."

"That part don't count," says I. "Nowadays if a child of twelve ain't halfway through Harvard his folks send for the doctor. I may be a hayseed, but I read the magazines."

He went right along, never payin' no attention, and praisin' up them screens as if he was nominatin' 'em for office. Finally he made proclamation that

he'd applied — in the store name, of course — for the Ostable County agency for 'em.

"But why?" says I. "We've got an adjustable screen agency now. And they're good screens, too. No mosquito can get through them — unless it takes to usin' a can-opener, which wouldn't surprise me a whole lot."

"I know they are good screens," says he; "but there's nothin' new or novel about 'em. And, I tell you, Cap'n Zeb, it's novelty that catches the coin. We want to get the contract for screenin' that new hotel at West Ostable. It'll be ready in a couple of months and there's two hundred rooms in it. Let's say there are two windows to a room; that's four hundred screens — besides doors and all the rest. That hotel will need screens, won't it?"

"Need 'em!" says I. "In West Ostable! In among all them salt meadows and cedar swamps! It'll need screens and nettin's and insect powder and 'intment — and even then nobody but the hard-of-hearin' bo'rders'll be able to sleep on account of the hummin'. Need screens! *That* hotel! My soul and body!"

Well, then, we must get the contract — that's all. It was well wuth the trouble of gettin'. And with the Adjustable Aluminum to start with, and he, Jim Henry, to do the talkin', we would get it. He'd applied for the county agency and the Adjustable

folks had about decided to give it to him. They'd write and let us know pretty soon.

A week went by and we didn't hear a word. Then, on the followin' Monday but one, come a letter. Jim Henry was openin' the mail and I heard him rip loose a brisk remark.

"What's the matter?" says I.

"Matter!" he snarls. "Why, the miserable four-flushers have turned me down — that's all. Read that!"

I took the letter he handed me. It was typewrote on a big sheet of paper, with a printed head, readin': "Ormstein & Meyer, Hardware and Tools. Manufacturers of Eureka Adjustable Aluminum Window Screens." And this is what it said:

Mr. J. H. Jacobs,
Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store, Ostable, Mass.

DEAR SIR: Regarding your application for Ostable County ag'y Eureka Adjustable Aluminum Window Screens, would say that we have decided to give ag'y to party named Geo. Lentz, who will give entire time to it instead making it a side issue as per your conversation with our Mr. Meyer. Regretting that we cannot do business together in this regard, but trusting for a continuance of your valued patronage, we remain Yours truly,

ORMSTEIN & MEYER.

Dic. M — L. G.

"Now what do you think of that?" snaps Jim, mad as he could stick. "What do you think of that!"

"Well," says I, slow, "I think that, speakin' as a man in the crosstrees, it looks as if you and me wouldn't furnish screens for the West Ostable Hotel."

He half shut his eyes and stared at me hard.

"Oh!" says he. "That's what you think, hey?"

"Why, yes," I says. "Don't you?"

"No!" he sings out, so loud that 'Dolph Cahoon, our new clerk, who'd been half asleep in the lee of the gingham and calico dressgoods counter, jumped up and stepped on the store cat. The cat beat for port down the back stairs, whoopin' comments, and 'Dolph begun measurin' calico as if he was wound up for eight days.

"No!" says Jacobs again, soon as the cat's opinion of 'Dolph had faded away into the cellar — "No!" he says. "I don't think it at all. We may not sell Eureka Adjustables to that hotel, but we'll sell screens to it — and don't you forget that. I'll make it my business to get that contract if I don't do anything else. I'm no quitter, if you are!"

"Nary quit!" says I. "I'll stand by to pull whatever rope I can; but it does seem to me that this agent, whoever he is, will have an eye on that

hotel. And, accordin' to your accounts, he's got better goods than we have."

"Maybe. But if he's a better salesman than I am he'll have to go some to prove it. I'll beat him, by fair means or foul, just to get even. That's a promise, Skipper, and I call you to witness it."

"Wonder who this Geo. Lentz is," says I. "'Tain't a Cape name, that's sure."

"I don't care who he is. I only wish he'd have the nerve to come into this store — that's all. He'd go out on the fly — I tell you that! And that's another promise."

Maybe 'twas; but, if so — However, I'm a little mite ahead of myself; fust come fust served, as the youngest boy said when the father undertook to thrash the whole family. The fust thing that happened after our talk and the Eureka folks' letter was Jim Henry's goin' over to West Ostable to see Parkinson, the hotel man. He went in the new runabout automobile that he'd bought since he got back from the West, and was gone pretty nigh all day. When he got back he was hopeful — I could see that.

"Well," says he, "I've laid the cornerstone. I've talked the Nonesuch "— that was the brand of screen we carried —" to beat the cars; and we'll have a show to get in a bid, at any rate. It'll be six weeks more afore the contract's given out, and meantime

yours truly will be on the job. If our old college chum, G. Lentz, Esquire, don't hustle he'll be left at the post."

"What sort of a chap is this Parkinson man?" I asked.

"Oh, he's all right; big and fat and good-natured. A good feller, I should say. Likes automobilin', too, and thinks my car is a winner."

"Married, is he?" says I.

"No; he's a widower. That's a good thing, too."

"Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"A whole lot. If he was married I'd have to take Mrs. P. along on our auto rides; and — let alone the fact that there wouldn't be room — she'd want to talk scenery instead of screens. Women and business don't mix. That's one reason why I've never married."

I couldn't help thinkin' of some of the hints he'd been heavin' at me — the "home" remarks and so on — but I never said nothin'.

This was a Tuesday. And when, on Thursday afternoon, I walked into the store, after havin' had dinner at the Poquit, I found 'Dolph Cahoon — our new clerk I've mentioned already — leanin' graceful and easy over the candy counter and talkin' with a young woman I'd never seen afore. I didn't look at her very close, but I got a sort of general observation as I walked aft to the post-office department;

and, sifted down, that observation left me with remembrances of a blue serge jacket and skirt, cut clipper fashion and fittin' as if they was built for the craft that was in 'em; a little blue hat — a real hat; not a velvet tar barrel upside down — with a little white gull's wing on it; brown eyes and brown hair, and a white collar and shirtwaist. I didn't stop to hail, you understand; but I judged that the stranger's home port wa'n't Ostable or any of the Cape towns. Ostable outfitters don't rig 'em that way.

I come in the side door, and 'Dolph or his customer didn't notice me. The young woman was lookin' into the showcase; and, as for 'Dolph, he wouldn't have noticed the President of the United States just then. He was twirlin' his red mustache with the hand that had the rock-crystal ring on the finger of it, and his talk was a sort of sugared purr — at least, that's the nighest description of it that I can get at.

I set down in my chair at the postmaster's desk and begun to turn over some papers. Mary had gone to dinner and Jim Henry was away in his auto; so I was all alone. I turned over the papers, but I couldn't get my mind on 'em — the talk outside was too prevailin', so to speak.

'Dolph was doin' the heft of it. The young woman's answers was short and not too interested. 'Dolph was remarkin' about the weather and what

a dull winter we'd had, and how glad he'd be when spring really set in and the summer folks begun to come — and so on.

"Really," says he, and though I couldn't see him I'd have bet that the mustache and ring was doin' business —"Really," he says, "there's a dreadful lack of cultivated society in this town, Miss — er —"

He held up here, waitin', I judged, for the young woman to give her name. However, she didn't; so he purred ahead.

"There's so few folks," he says, "for a young feller like me — used to the city — to associate with. This is a jay place all right. I'm only here temporary. I shall go back to Brockton in the fall, I guess."

I guessed he'd go sooner; but I kept still.

"Are you goin' to remain here for some time?" he asked.

"Possibly," says the girl.

"I'm 'fraid you'll find it pretty dull, won't you?"

"Perhaps."

"I should be glad to introduce you to the folks that are worth knowin'. Are you fond of dancin'? There's a subscription ball at the town hall to-night."

This was what a lawyer'd call a leadin' question, seemed to me; but the answer didn't seem to lead to anything warmer than the North Pole. The young woman said, "Indeed?" and that was all.

"I'm perfectly dippy about waltzin'," says 'Dolph. "By the way, won't you have some confectionery? These chocolates are pretty fair."

I riz to my feet. I don't mind bein' a philanthropist once in a while, but I like to do my philanthropin' fust-hand. And them chocolates sold for sixty cents a pound!

I had my hand on the doorknob. Just as I turned it I heard the young woman say, crisp and cold as a fresh cucumber:

"Pardon me, but will your employer be in soon? If not I'll call again — when he is in."

"You won't have to," says I, steppin' out of the post-office room and walkin' over toward the candy counter. "One of him's in now. 'Dolph, you can put them chocolates back in the case. Oh, yes — and you might associate yourself with the broom and waltz out and sweep the front platform. It's been needin' your cultivated society bad."

The rest of that clerk's face turned as red as his mustache, and the way he slammed the chocolate box into the showcase was a caution! Then I turned to the young woman, who was as sober as a deacon, except for her eyes, which were snappin' with fun, and says I:

"You wanted to see me, I believe, miss. My name's Zebulon Snow and I'm one of the partners in this jay place. What can I do for you?"

She waited until 'Dolph and the broom had moved out to the platform. Then she turned to me and she says:

"Captain Snow," she says, "I understand that your firm here is intendin' puttin' in a bid for the window screens at the new hotel at West Ostable. Is that so?"

I was consider'ble surprised, but I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't tell the truth.

"Why, yes, ma'am," says I; "we are figgerin' on the job. Are you interested in that hotel? If you are I'd be glad to show you samples of the Nonesuch screen. We cal'late that it's a mighty slick article."

She smiled, pretty as a picture.

"I am interested in the hotel," she says; "and in screens, though not exactly in the way you mean, perhaps. Here is my card."

She took a little leather wallet out of her jacket-pocket and handed me a card. I took it. 'Twas printed neat as could be; but it wa'n't the neatness of the printin' that set me all aback, with my canvas flappin'—'twas what that printin' said:

GEORGIANNA LENTZ

OSTABLE COUNTY AGENT FOR THE
EUREKA ADJUSTABLE ALUMINUM WINDOW SCREEN

"What? — What! — Hey?" says I.

"Yes," says she.

"Agent for the Eureka Adjusta — You!"

"Why, yes; of course. The Eureka people wrote you that they had given me the agency, didn't they?"

I rubbed my forehead.

"They wrote my partner and me," I stammered, "that they'd given it to — to a feller named George — er — that is —"

"Not George — Georgianna. Oh, I see! They abbreviated the name and so you thought — Of course you did. How odd!"

She laughed. I'd have laughed too, maybe, if I'd had sense enough to think of it; but I hadn't, just then.

"You the agent!" says I. "A — a woman!"

"Yes."

"But — but a woman!"

"Well?" pretty crisp. "I admit I am a woman; but is that any reason why I should not sell window screens?"

I rubbed my forehead some more. These are progressive days we're livin' in, and sometimes I have to hustle to keep abreast of 'em.

"Why, no," says I, slow; "I cal'late 'tain't. I suppose there's no law against a woman's sellin' 'most any article that is salable, window screens

or anything else if she wants to; but I can't see —"

"Why she should want to? Perhaps not. However, we needn't go into that just now. The fact is I do want to and intend to. I have secured a boardin' place here in Ostable and shall make the town my headquarters. This is a small community and one naturally prefers to be friendly with all the people in it. So, after thinkin' the matter over, I decided that it was best to begin with a clear understandin'. Do you follow me?"

"I — I guess so. Heave ahead; I'll do my best to keep you in sight. If the weather gets too thick I'll sound the foghorn. Go on."

"I am naturally desirous of securin' the hotel screen contract. So, I understand, are you. I have seen Mr. Parkinson, the hotel man, and he tells me that your firm and mine will probably be the only bidders. Now that makes us rivals, but it need not necessarily make us enemies. My proposition is this: You will submit your bid and I will submit mine. The party submittin' the lowest bid — quality of product considered — will win. I propose that we let it go in that way. We might, of course, do a great many other things — might attempt to bring influence to bear; might — well, might cultivate Mr. Parkinson's acquaintance, and — and so on. You might do that — so might I, I suppose; but, for my

part, I prefer to make this a fair, honorable business rivalry, in which the best man — er —"

"Or woman," I couldn't help puttin' in.

"In which the best bid wins. I have already demonstrated the Eureka for Mr. Parkinson's benefit and left a sample with him. He tells me that you have done the same with the Nonesuch. I will agree — if you will — to let the matter rest there, submittin' our respective bids when the time comes and abidin' by the result. Now what do you say?"

'Twas pretty hard to say anything. I wanted to laugh; but I couldn't do that. If there ever was anybody in dead earnest 'twas this partic'lar young woman. And she wa'n't the kind to laugh at either. She might be in a queer sort of business for a female — but she was nobody's fool.

"Well," she asks again, "what do you say?"

I shook my head. "I can't say anything very definite just this minute," I told her. "I've got a partner, and naturally I can't do much without consultin' him; but I will say this, though," noticin' that she looked pretty disappointed —"I'll say that, fur's I'm concerned, I'm agreeable."

She smiled and, as I cal'late I've said afore, her smile was wuth lookin' at.

"Thank you so much, Cap'n Snow," she says. "Then we shall be friends, sha'n't we? Except in business, I mean."

"I hope so — sartin,' says I. "Now it ain't none of my affairs, of course, but I am curious. How did you ever happen to take the agency for — for window screens?"

That made her serious right off. She might smile at other things, but not at her trade; that was life and death for sure.

"I took it," she says, "for several reasons. My mother died recently and I was left alone. My means were not sufficient to support me. I have done office work, typewritin', and so on, for some years; but I felt that the opportunities in the positions I held were limited and I determined to take up sellin'— that is where the larger returns are. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes — sartin."

"Yes. I knew Mr. Meyer slightly in a business way. I took the Eureka screen and sold it on commission about Boston for a time. Then I applied for the Ostable County agency and got it — that's all."

"I see," says I. "Yes, yes. Well, I must say that, for a girl, you —"

She interrupted me quick.

"I don't see that my bein' a girl has anything to do with it," she says. "And in this agreement of ours, if it is made, I don't wish the difference of sex considered at all. This is a business proposition

and sex has nothin' to do with it. Is that plain?"

"Yes," says I, considerin', "it's plain; but I ain't sure that—"

"I am sure," she interrupts—"and you must be. I wish to be treated in this matter exactly as if I were a man. I wish I were one!"

"I doubt if you'd get most men to agree with you in that wish," I says. "However, never mind. I'll do my best to get Mr. Jacobs, my partner, to say 'Yes' to your proposal. And I hope you'll do fust-rate, even if we are what you call rivals. Drop in any time, Miss Georg—Georgianna, I mean."

We shook hands and she went away. I went as fur as the platform with her. When I turned to go in again I noticed 'Dolph Cahoon starin' after her, with his eyes and mouth open.

"Gosh!" says he, grinnin'. "By gosh! She's a peach! Ain't she, Cap'n Zeb?"

"Maybe so," says I, pretty short; "but I don't recollect that we hired you as a judge of fruit. Has that broom took root in the dirt on this platform? Or what is the matter?"

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT CAME THROUGH THE SCREEN

JACOBS come in late that afternoon.

"Say," says he, "there was a sample of the Eureka screen in Parkinson's office when I was there just now. He wouldn't say who left it or anything about it. When I asked he grinned and winked. That's all. Confound his fat head! Do you know where it came from?"

"I can guess," I says; and then I told him the whole yarn. He was as surprised as I was to find out that Geo. Lentz was a female; but it only made him madder than ever — if such a thing's possible.

"Wants to be treated like a man, does she?" he says. "All right; we'll treat her like one. She may be Georgianna, but she'll get just what was comin' to George."

"Then you won't agree to puttin' in the bids and lettin' it go at that?"

"I'll agree to get that screen contract, all right!" says he, emphatic.

I was kind of sorry for Miss Lentz; but Jim Henry was my partner, so there wa'n't nothin' more to be

said. We didn't mention the subject again for two days. However, I did hear from the Eureka agent durin' that time. 'Twas 'Dolph that I got my news of her from. I was tellin' Mary Blaisdell about her and Cahoon happened to be standin' by.

"So she boards here in Ostable," says Mary. "I wonder where."

Afore I could answer 'Dolph spoke up. "She's stoppin' at Maria Berry's, down on the Neck Road," he says.

"How did you know?" I asked.

He looked sort of silly. "Oh, I found out," says he, and walked off.

The very next evenin', as I was strollin' along the sidewalk, smokin' my good-night pipe, I happened to see somebody turn the corner from the Neck Road and hurry by me. I thought his gait and build were pretty familiar, so I turned and followed. When he got abreast the lighted windows of the billiard saloon I recognized him. 'Twas 'Dolph, all togged out in his Sunday-go-to-meetin' duds, light fall overcoat and all.

"Humph!" says I to myself. "So that's how you knew, hey? Been callin' on her, have you? Well, she may not hanker for my sympathy, but she has it just the same. I swan, I thought she had better taste! I'm surprised!"

The followin' mornin', however, I was more sur-

prised still. I had an errand that made me late at the store. When I came in who should I see talkin' together but Jacobs and a young woman; the young woman was Miss Georgianna Lentz. They ought to have been quarrelin', 'cordin' to all reasonable expectations; but they wa'n't. Fact is, they seemed as friendly as could be. You'd have thought they was old chums to see 'em.

Georgianna sighted me fust.

"Good mornin', Cap'n Snow," says she. "Mr. Jacobs and I have made each other's acquaintance, you see."

"Yes," says I, doubtful. "I see you have. I cal'late you think it's kind of unreasonable, our not —"

Jim Henry cut in ahead of me quick as a flash.

"Miss Lentz and I have been goin' over the matter of screens for Parkinson's hotel," he says. "I tell her that her proposition suits us down to the ground."

Over I went on my beam-ends again. All I could think of to say was: "Hey?"— and I said that pretty feeble.

"It is very nice of you to do this," says Georgianna. "It makes it so much easier for me. Of course, when I decided to make business my life-work, I realized that I might be called upon to do disagreeable things like — like wire-pullin', and so

on, which some business people do; but honorable rivalry is so much better, isn't it?"

"Sure!" says Jacobs, prompt. "Yes, indeed."

"So it is all settled," she went on. "Our bids are to go in on the same day; and meantime neither of us is to call on Mr. Parkinson or to meet him — in a business way, I mean."

I nodded, bein' still too upset to talk; but Jim Henry spoke quick and prompt.

"What do you mean," he asks —"in a business way?"

"Why," says she — and it seemed to me that she reddened a little —"I mean that — well, if we should meet him by accident we wouldn't talk about screens or the hotel contract. Of course one can't help meetin' people sometimes. For instance, I happened to meet Mr. Parkinson yesterday. He had driven over and happened to be in the vicinity of the house where I board. I was goin' out for a walk, and he stopped his horse and spoke."

"Oh," says I, "he did, hey?" Jim Henry didn't say nothin'.

"Yes," she says; "but I didn't talk about the contract. Though our agreement wasn't actually made then, I hoped that it would be. Good mornin'; I must be goin'."

She started for the door, but she turned to say one more thing.

"Of course," she says, decided, "it is understood that you haven't agreed to my proposal simply because I am a girl. If that was the case I shouldn't permit it. I insist upon bein' treated exactly as if I were a man. You must promise that — both of you."

"Sure! Sure! That's understood," says Jacobs.

I said "Sure!" too, but my tone wa'n't quite so sartin. She went out, Jim Henry goin' with her as fur as the door. I follered him.

"Say," says I, "next time you turn a back somerset like this I'd like to know about it in advance. I've got a weak heart."

He didn't answer me at all. He was starin' down the road, just as 'Dolph had stared when the Eureka agent called the fust time.

"Say, Jim —" says I. He didn't turn or move; didn't seem to hear me. I touched him on the shoulder and he jumped and come about.

"Eh — what?" he says.

"Nothin'," says I, "only I want to know why — that's all."

"Why?" says he. "Oh! — you mean what made me change my mind? Well, I just thought it over and decided we might as well agree. Agreein' don't do any harm, you know. Hey, Skipper? Ha-ha!"

He slapped me on the shoulder and laughed.

The laugh seemed too big for the joke and sounded a little mite forced, I thought.

"Yes, yes! Ha-ha!" says I. "But your changin' from lion to lamb so sudden —"

"What are you talkin' about? I've got a right to change my mind, ain't I?"

"Sartin sure. But you was so set on gettin' that contract."

"Well, I ain't said I wasn't goin' to get it, have I? We're goin' to put in a bid, ain't we? What's the matter with you?"

"Nothin' at all; but *your* breakfast don't seem to have set extry well! However, it takes two to make a row, and I'm peaceful, myself. What do you think of the rival entry? Kind of a nice-appearin' girl — don't you think so?"

He whirled round and looked at me as if he thought I was crazy.

"Nice-appearin'!" he says. "Nice-ap — Why, she's —"

Then he pulled up short and headed for the back room.

Nothin' of much importance happened for a while after that. And yet there was somethin'— two or three somethin's — that had a bearin' on the case. One was the change in 'Dolph Cahoon. For a few days after that night I met him on the road he was as gay and chipper as a blackbird in a pear tree —

happy even when I made him work, which was surprisin' enough. And then, all to once, he turned glum and ugly. Wouldn't speak and seemed to be broodin' over his troubles all day long. I had my suspicions; and so, one time when him and me was alone, I hove over a little mite of bait just to see if he'd rise to it.

"Seen anything of the Lentz girl lately?" I asked, casual.

"Naw," says he, "and I don't want to, neither! She's a bird, she is! Too stuck up to speak to common folks. Everybody's gettin' on to her — you bet! She won't make many friends in this town."

I grinned to myself. Thinks I: "I guess, young man, Georgianna's handed you your walkin' papers. You won't go down the Neck Road any more!"

And yet, an evenin' or so after that, I see somebody go down that road. I didn't see him plain, but I'd have almost taken my oath 'twas Jim Henry Jacobs. It couldn't be, of course — and yet —

Well, two days later, I took back the "yet." I happened to be standin' at the side door of the store, lookin' across the fields, when I saw an auto with two people in it sailin' along the crossroad from the east'ard. 'Twas a runabout auto — and I looked and looked! Then I called to 'Dolph.

"'Dolph," says I, "come here! Who's auto-

mobile's that? If I didn't know Mr. Jacobs was off takin' orders in Denboro I should say 'twas his."

'Dolph looked.

"Humph!" says he—"'tis his. He's drivin' it himself. But who's that with him? What? Well, by gosh! if it ain't that stuck-up Georgianna Lentz!"

"Get out!" says I. "The softness of your heart has struck to your head. It's likely he'd be takin' her to ride, ain't it!"

And then Jacobs looked up and sighted us standin' in the doorway. His machine hadn't been goin' slow afore — now it fairly jumped off the ground and flew. In a minute there was nothin' but a dust-cloud in the offin'.

He came in about noon. I didn't say nothin', but I guess my face was enough. He looked at me, turned away — and then turned back again.

"Well," he says, loud and cheerful, "you saw us, didn't you? I was goin' to tell you, anyway, soon as I got the chance."

"Oh," says I, "I want to know!"

"Sure, I was. Of course you see through the game."

"The game?"

"Why, yes, yes! The game I'm playin'— the game that's goin' to get us that screen contract! Oh, I wasn't born yesterday. I knew a thing or two. This — er — Lentz girl and you and me have

agreed not to go near Parkinson till the contract's given out; but Parkinson ain't promised not to go near her! He's been over there two or three times lately, and that won't do. He's a widower, and —"

"A widower!" I put in. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, nothin'— nothin'. Just a joke, that's all. But I realized right away that she and he mustn't be together or he'll make her talk screens in spite of herself, and that'll be dangerous for us. So, says I to myself, 'Jim Henry,' says I, 'it's up to you. You must keep her out of his way.' That's why I've been goin' to see her once in a while and — and takin' her to ride, and — and so on. See? Oh, I'm wise! You trust your old doctor of sick businesses."

He'd been talkin' a blue streak. Seemed almost as if he was afraid I'd say somethin' afore he could say it all. Now he stopped to get his breath and I put in a word.

"So," says I, slow, "that's why you're doin' it, hey? But ain't that — You know you promised to treat her just as if she was a man!"

"Well, ain't I?" he snaps — hotter than was needful, I thought. "If she was a man I'd make it my business to keep her in sight, wouldn't I? Well, then! I never saw such a chap as you are for lookin' for trouble when there isn't any."

He stalked off. I follered him; and as I done so I noticed 'Dolph Cahoon duck behind the calico counter. I judged he'd heard every word.

The finishin' work on the hotel hustled along and inside of a month we got word that 'twas time to put in our bid. Jacobs and I figured and figured till we got the price down to the last cent we thought it could stand, and then we sent our proposition over to Parkinson by mail.

"Wonder if Miss Georgianna's sent hers in," I says, casual.

"Oh, yes," says Jim, prompt; "she is goin' to mail it this mornin'."

I didn't ask him how he knew. His chasin' round and keepin' watch on a girl who was as fair-minded and square as she was had always seemed too much like spyin' to please me, and I cal'lated he knew how I felt — at any rate he'd scurcely spoke her name since the day when I saw 'em autoin' together. But now I did say that, so long as the bids was in, it wouldn't be necessary for him to keep his eye on her any longer.

He looked at me kind of queer. "Umph!" he says; "maybe not!" And he walked away to attend to a customer.

That afternoon he took his car and went off on his reg'lar order trip to Denboro and Bayport and round. 'Dolph Cahoon and I was alone in the

front part of the store. 'Dolph seemed to be in mighty good spirits — for him — and kept chucklin' to himself in a way I couldn't understand. At last he says to me, lookin' back to be sure that Mary Blaisdell, in the post-office department, couldn't hear —

"Cap'n Zeb," he says, "what would you give the feller that got the screen contract for you?"

"Give him?" I says. "What feller do you mean — Parkinson? I wouldn't give him a cent! I ain't a briber and I don't think he's a grafter."

"I don't mean Parkinson," he says, chucklin'. "But, suppose somebody else had been workin' for you on the quiet, what would you give him?"

I looked him over.

"Look here, 'Dolph," says I; "I never try to guess a riddle till I hear the whole of it. What are you drivin' at?"

He grinned. "I know who's goin' to get that contract," he says.

"You do. Who is it?"

"The Ostable Store's goin' to get it. Your bid's a little mite the lowest. Parkinson told me so last night."

"Parkinson told you!" I sung out. "How did you happen to see Parkinson?"

He winked.

"Oh, I saw him!" says he. "I've seen him a

good many times lately. I made it my business to see him. He was pretty stuck on the Eureka till I got after him and I cal'late he'd have contracted for Eurekas, bid or no bid. But I put in my licks; I've drove over to West Ostable four nights and two Sundays in the last fortni't. And didn't I preach Nonesuch to him! He-he! You bet I did! And last night he said he was goin' to give us the job. Oh, I fixed that stuck-up Georgianna Lentz! I got even with her. He-he-he!"

I never was madder in my life. I took two steps toward him with my fists doubled up.

"You whelp!" says I — and then I stopped short. The Lentz girl herself was walkin' in at the front door.

"Good mornin', Cap'n Snow," she says, holdin' out her hand. She paid no more attention to 'Dolph than if he'd been a graven image. "Good mornin'," says she. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

I was past carin' about the weather.

"Miss Georgianna," says I, "I'm glad you come in. I've got somethin' to tell you. I've got to beg your pardon for somethin' that ain't my fault or Mr. Jacobs', either. You and my partner and me had an agreement not to go nigh Parkinson or try to influence him in any way. Well, unbeknown to me, that agreement has been broke."

She stared at me, too astonished to speak.

"It's been broke," says I. "That — that critter there," pointin' to 'Dolph, "has been sneakin —"

'Dolph's face had been gettin' redder and redder. I cal'late he thought I'd praise him for his doin's; and when he found I wouldn't, but was goin' to give the whole thing away, he blew up like a leaky b'iler.

"I ain't been sneakin'!" he yelled. "And I ain't broke no agreement, neither. You and Mr. Jacobs agreed — but I never. I see Parkinson on my own hook; and if it hadn't been for me he wouldn't be goin' to give you the contract."

There 'twas, out of the bag. I looked at Georgianna. Her pretty face went white. That contract meant all creation to her; but she stood up to the news like a major. She was plucky, that girl!

"Oh!" she says. "Oh! Then he has given you the contract? I — I congratulate you, Cap'n Snow."

"Don't congratulate me," says I. "The contract ain't been given yet, though this pup says it's goin' to be; but, as for me, if I'd known what was goin' on I'd have stopped it mighty quick! I'm honorable and decent, and so's Jacobs; and we don't take underhanded advantages."

'Dolph bust out from astern of the counter.

"You don't, hey!" says he. "I want to know! How about Jacobs' takin' her to ride and callin' on her, and pretendin' to be dead gone on her? What

did he do that for? You know as well as I do. 'Twas so's to keep a watch on her, and not let Parkinson see her and be influenced into buyin' Eureka screens. You know it!"

My own face grew red now, I cal'late.

"You — you —" I begun. "You miser'ble liar —"

"'Tain't a lie," says he. "I heard him tell you with my own ears. He said all he was beauin' her round for was just that. If that ain't a underhanded trick then I don't know what is."

I wanted to say lots more; but, afore I could get my talkin' machinery to runnin', the Lentz girl herself spoke.

"Is that true, Cap'n Snow?" says she.

I was set back forty fathom.

"Well, miss," says I, "I — I —"

"Is that true?" says she.

I got out my handkerchief and swabbed my forehead.

"Well, Miss Georgianna," says I, "I'll tell you. Jim Henry — Mr. Jacobs, I mean — did say somethin' like that; but — but — Well, you wanted to be treated like a salesman, and — er — Mr. Jacobs would have kept his eye on a man, you know; and so — and so —"

I stopped again. 'Twas the shoalest water ever I cruised in. All I could do was mop away with the

handkerchief and look at Georgianna. And she — well, the color, and plenty of it, begun to come back to her cheeks. And how her brown eyes did flash!

"I see," she says, slow and so frosty I pretty nigh shivered. "I — see!"

"Well," says I, "'tain't anything I'm proud of, I will admit; but —"

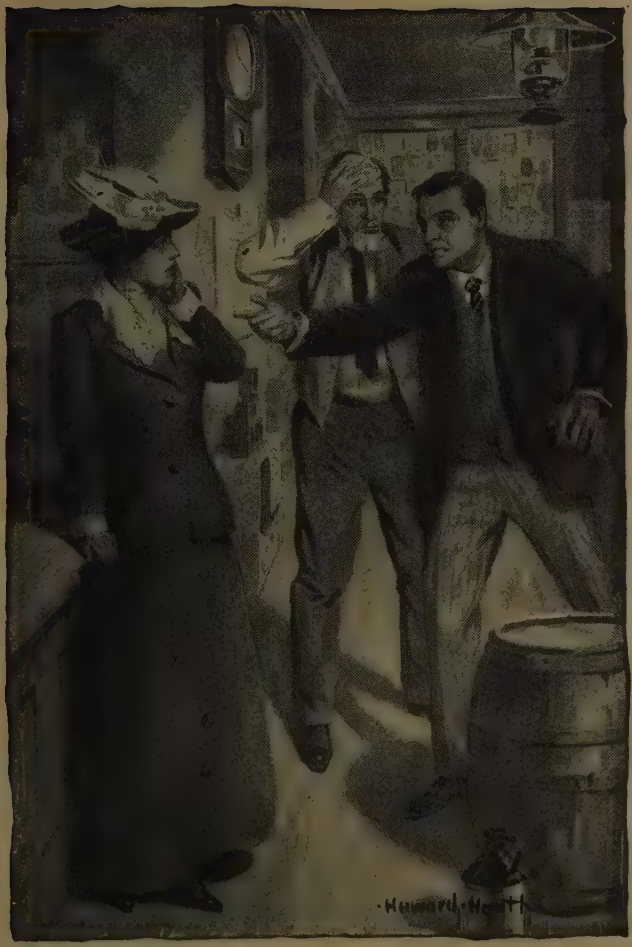
"One moment, if you please. You haven't actually got the contract yet?"

"No. As I told you, all I know is what this consarned fo'mast hand of mine says. For what he's done, I'm ashamed as I can be. As for Mr. Jacobs, I know he did keep to the letter of the agreement, anyhow. For the rest — Well, all's fair in love and war, they say — and there's precious little love in business."

She looked at me, with a queer little smile about the corners of her lips, though her eyes wa'n't smilin', by a consider'ble sight.

"Isn't there?" she says. "I — I wonder. Good-by, Cap'n Snow. You might tell Mr. Jacobs not to order those Nonesuch screens just yet."

Out she went; and for the next five minutes I had a real enjoyable time. I told 'Dolph Cahoon just what I thought of him — that took four of the minutes; durin' the other one I fired him and run him out of the office by the scruff of the neck.



"'I ain't been sneakin'!' he yelled."

Then Mary Blaisdell and me held officers' council, and that ended by our decidin' not to tell Jim Henry that the Lentz girl knew why he'd been so friendly with her. It wouldn't do any good and might make him feel bad. Besides, the contract was as good as got, 'cordin' to 'Dolph's yarn; and 'twa'n't likely he'd see Georgianna again, anyway. When he come back I told him I'd fired Cahoon for bein' no good and sassy, and he agreed I'd done just right.

When I said good night to him he was chipper as could be; but next day he was blue as a whetstone — and the blueness seemed to strike in, so to speak. He didn't take any interest in anything — moped round, glum and ugly; and I couldn't get him to talk at all. If I mentioned the screen contract he shut up like a quahaug, and only once did he give an opinion about it. That opinion was a surprisin' one, though.

Alpheus Perkins was in the store, and says he:

"Say, Mr. Jacobs," he says, "is old Parkinson, the hotel man, cal'latin' to get married again? I see him out ridin' with a girl yesterday? That female screen drummer — that Georgianna Lentz, 'twas. She's a daisy, ain't she! I don't blame him much for takin' a shine to her."

Jim Henry didn't make any answer; but, knowin' what I did, I was a little surprised.

"Jim," says I, "that contract —"

"D—n the contract!" says he, and cleared out and left us.

I was astonished, but I guessed 'twas a healthy plan to keep my hatches closed.

When I opened the mail a few mornin's later I found a letter with the West Ostable Hotel's name printed on the envelope. I figgered I knew what was inside. Thinks I: "Here's the acceptance of our bid!" But my figgers was on the wrong side of the ledger. Parkinson wrote just a few words, but they was enough. After considerin' the matter careful, he wrote, he had decided the Eureka to be a better screen than the Nonesuch; and, though our bid was a trifle lower, he should give the Eureka folks the contract.

"Well!" says I out loud. "Well, I'll — be — blessed!"

Jim Henry was settin' at his desk — we was all alone in the store — and he looked up.

"What are you askin' a blessin' over?" says he.

I handed him the letter. He read it through and set for a full minute without speakin'. Then he slammed it into the wastebasket and got up and started to go away.

"For thunder sakes!" I sung out. "What ails you? Ain't you goin' to say nothin' at all?"

"What is there to say?" he asked, gruff. "We're stung — and that's the end of it."

"But — but — don't you realize — Why, our bid was the lowest! And yet the contract —"

He whirled on me savage.

"Didn't I tell you," says he, "that I didn't give a durn about the contract?"

"You don't! *You* don't! Then who on airth does?"

"I don't know and I don't care!"

"You don't care! I swan to man! Why, 'twas you that swore you'd put the screens in that hotel or die tryin'. You said 'twas a matter of principle with you. And now that the Eureka folks have beat us by some shenanigan or other — for our bid was lower than theirs — you say you don't care! Have you gone loony? What *do* you care about?"

"Nothin'— much," says he, and flopped down in his chair again.

I stared at him. All at once I begun to see a light. You'd have thought anybody that wa'n't stone blind would have seen it afore — but I hadn't. You see, I cal'lated that I knew him from trunk to keelson, and so it never once occurred to me. I riz and walked over to him. Just as I done so, I heard the front door open and shut, but I figgered 'twas Mary comin' back, and didn't even look. I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Jim," says I, "I guess likely I understand. I

declare I'm sorry! And yet I wouldn't wonder if —"

I didn't go on. He wa'n't payin' any attention, but was lookin' over the top of his desk — lookin' with all the eyes in his head. I looked, too, and caught my breath with a jerk. The person who'd come in wa'n't Mary Blaisdell, but Georgianna Lentz.

She saw us and walked straight down to where we was. She was kind of pale and her eyes looked as if she'd been awake all night; but when she spoke 'twas right to the point — there wa'n't any hesitation about her.

"Cap'n Snow," says she, "have you heard from Mr. Parkinson?"

"Yes," says I, wonderin; "we've heard. We don't understand exactly, but perhaps that ain't necessary. I cal'late all there is left for us to do is to offer congratulations and 'go 'way back and set down,' as the boys say. You've got the contract."

"Yes," she says; "it has been given to me. But —"

Jim Henry stood up. "You'll excuse me," he says, sharp. "I'm busy."

He started to go, but she stopped him.

"No," she says; "I want you both to hear what I've got to say. Mr. Parkinson gave me the con-

tract yesterday; but I have decided not to take it."

We both looked at her.

"You — you've what?" says I. "Not take it? You want it, don't you?"

"Yes," she says, quiet but determined, "I want it — or I did want it very, very much. It meant so much to me — now — and might mean a great deal more in the future; but I can't take it."

This was too many for me. I looked at Jacobs. He didn't say a word.

"I can't take it," says Georgianna, "under the circumstances. I don't feel that I got it fairly. We agreed, you and I, that no personal influence should be brought to bear upon Mr. Parkinson; and I"— she blushed a little, but kept right on —"I have seen Mr. Parkinson several times durin' the past week."

I thought of her bein' to ride with the hotel man, but I didn't say anything. Jim Henry, though, started again to go. And again she stopped him.

"Wait, please!" she went on. "I didn't go to him — you must understand that! But after what you, Cap'n Snow, and that Mr. Cahoon told me the other day I was hurt and angry. I felt that you had broken your agreement with me. So when Mr. Parkinson came to see me I didn't avoid him as I had been doin'. I — I accepted invitations for drives with him, and — and — Oh, don't you see?

I couldn't take the contract. I couldn't! What would you think of me? What would I think of myself? No, my mind is made up. I'm afraid "— with a half smile that had more tears than fun in it — " that my experience in business hasn't been a success. I shall give it up and go back to stenography — or somethin'. There! Good-by. I'm sure that the Nonesuch screen will win now. Good-by!"

And now 'twas she that started to go and Jim Henry that stopped her.

"Wait!" says he, sharp. "There's somethin' here I don't understand. What do you mean by what the Cap'n and Cahoon told you the other day? Skipper, what have you been doin'?"

I wished there was a crack or a knothole handy for me to crawl into; but there wa'n't, so I braced up best I could.

"Why, Jim," says I, "I ain't told you the whole of that business I fired 'Dolph for. Seems he'd been seein' Parkinson on his own hook and pullin' wires for the Nonesuch. 'Twas a sneakin' mean trick, and I knew 'twould make you mad same as it done me; so I didn't tell you. 'Twas for that I bounced him."

Jim Henry's fists shut.

"The toad!" says he. "I wish I'd been there. Wait till I get my hands on him! I'll —"

"But you mustn't," put in Georgianna. "I hope

you don't think I care what such a creature as he might do. When I first came here he — Oh, why can't people forget that I'm a girl!"

I could have answered that, but I didn't. Jacobs asked another question.

"Then, if it wa'n't 'Dolph, who was it?" says he. "Parkinson?"

"No!" with a flash of her eyes. "Certainly not. Mr. Parkinson is a gentleman; but — but I don't like him — that is, I don't dislike him exactly; but —"

She was dreadful fussed up. Jim Henry was between her and the door, though, and he kept right on with his questions.

"Then what was the trouble?" he said, brisk.

I answered for her.

"Well, Jim," says I, "there was somethin' else. You see, 'Dolph got mad when I sailed into him, and he come back at me by tellin' what you said about your callin' on Miss Lentz here — and takin' her autoin' and such. How you said you was doin' it so's to keep a watch on her — that's all. I couldn't deny that you did say it, you know — because you did!"

Jim's face was a sight to see — a sort of combination of sheepishness and shame, mixed with another look, almost of joy — or as if he'd got the answer to a puzzle that had been troublin' him.

The Lentz girl spoke up quick.

"Of course," she says, "I understand now why you did it. Then I was — was — Well, it did hurt me to think that I hadn't seen through the scheme, and for a while I felt that you hadn't been true to our agreement; but, now that I have had time to think, I understand. You promised to treat me exactly as if I were a man; and, as Cap'n Snow said, if I were a man you would have kept me in sight. It's all right! But"— with a sigh —"I realize that I'm not fitted for business — this kind of business. I don't blame you, though. Good-by. I must go!"

Lettin' her go, however, was the last thing Jim intended doin' just then. He stepped for'ard and caught her by the hand.

"Georgianna," says he, eager, "you know what you're sayin' isn't true. I did tell the Cap'n that yarn about watchin' you. He'd seen me with you and I had to tell him somethin'; but it was a lie — every word of it! You know it was."

She tried to pull her hand away, but he hung on to it as if 'twas the last life-preserver on a sinkin' ship. I cal'late he'd forgot I was on earth.

"You were keeping your promise," she said. "You were treatin' me as you would if I were a man! Please let me go, Mr. Jacobs; I have told you that I didn't blame you."

"Nonsense!" says he. "If I had done that I ought to be hung! A man! Treat you like a man! Do you suppose if you were a man I should —"

That was the last word I heard. I was bound for the front platform, and makin' some headway for a craft of my age and build. I have got some sense and I know when three's a crowd!

I didn't go back until they called me. I give the pair of 'em one look and then I shook hands with 'em up to the elbows. Georgianna was blushin', and her eyes were damp, but shinin' like masthead lights on a rainy night. As for Jim Henry Jacobs, he was one broad grin.

"Well," says I, after I'd said all the joyful things I could think of, "one point ain't settled even yet — who's goin' to get that screen contract? There ain't any love in business, you know."

"Humph!" says Jim Henry. "I wonder!"

I laughed out loud.

"Why," says I, "that's exactly what Georgianna here said t'other day — she wondered!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE EPISTLE TO ICHABOD

MARY came in a few minutes later and she had to be told the news. She was as pleased as I was and there was more congratulatin'. Then Georgianna had to go home and, as she was altogether too precious to be allowed to walk, Jim Henry went and got his auto and they left in that.

When he got back — that car must have been sufferin' from a stroke of creepin' paralysis, for it took him two hours to run that little distance — he and I had a good confidential talk. He was way up above this common earth, soarin' around in the clouds, and all he wanted to talk was Georgianna. The whole of creation had been set to music and was dancin' to the one tune — "Georgianna."

It was astonishin' to me who had been in the habit of considerin' him just a sharp, up-to-date buyer and seller, a man whose whole soul was wrapped up in business with no room in it for anything else. I found myself lookin' at him and wonderin': "Is the world comin' to an end, I wonder? Is this my

partner? Is this moon-struck critter Jim Henry Jacobs, doctor of sick businesses?"

I couldn't help jokin' him a little.

"Jim," says I, "for a feller who hadn't any use for females you're doin' pretty well, I must say. Either you was mistaken in your old opinions or your new ones are wrong. Which is it? 'Women and business don't mix,' you know. That ain't an original notion; that is quoted from the Gospel according to Jacobs, Chapter 1,000; two hundred and eightieth verse."

He reddened up and laughed. "Well, they *don't* mix, as a general thing," he says. "I guess 'twas Georgianna's sand in goin' into business that got me in the first place. I leave it to you, Skipper — ain't she a wonder? Now be honest, ain't she?"

Course I said she was; I have the usual sane man's regard for my head and I didn't want it knocked off yet awhile. And Georgianna *was* as nice a girl as I ever saw — that is, *almost* as nice. Jim went sailin' on, about how now he could settle down and live like a white man in a home of his own, about the house he was goin' to build, and so forth and etcetery. I declare it made me feel almost jealous to hear him.

"My! my!" says I, kind of spiteful, I'm afraid, "you have got it bad, ain't you! Sudden attacks are liable to be the most acute, I suppose."

He laughed again. You couldn't have made him mad just then.

"Ha, ha!" says he. "Yes, I guess I'm way past where there's any hope for me. But I'm glad of it. It did come sudden, but that's the way most good things come to me. It's my nature. Now if I was like some folks that I won't name, I'd be mopin' around for months without sense enough to know what ailed me."

"Who are you diggin' at?" I wanted to know. He wouldn't tell; said 'twas a secret, and maybe I'd find out the answer for myself some day.

The next few weeks was busy times, in the store and out of it. Georgianna havin' declined the screen contract, Parkinson gave it to us, after a little arguin'. That kept me hustlin', for Jim was too interested in other things to care for screens. He was making arrangements to be married.

And married he and Georgianna were. She'd have waited a little longer, I cal'late — that bein' a woman's way — if it had been left to her to name the time; but Jim Henry never was the waitin' kind. They were married at the parson's and Mary Blaisdell and I saw the splice made fast. Then we went to the depot and said good-by to Mr. and Mrs. Jim Henry Jacobs. They were goin' on a honeymoon cruise to the West Indies that would last two months.

Good-byes ain't ever pleasant to say, but I was so

glad for Jim, and so happy because he was, that I tried to be as chipper as I could.

"If you need me, wire at Havana, Skipper," he says. "I'll come the minute you say the word."

"I sha'n't need you," I told him. "Mary and I'll run things as well as we can. She makes a good fust mate, Mary does."

"You bet!" says he. "I feel a little conscience-struck to leave you just now, with that West End crowd tryin' to make trouble for you, but Congressman Shelton is your friend and he'll look out for you in Washin'ton."

"Don't you worry about that," I says. "I ain't scared of Bill Phipps or Ike Hamilton — much, or any of their West End crew. The decent folks in town are on my side, and with Shelton to back me up at Washin'ton, I cal'late I'll keep my job till you come back anyhow."

The train started and Mary and I waved till 'twas out of sight. Then we went back to the store. I give in that the old feelin', the feelin' that I'd had when Jim was sick out West, that of bein' adrift without an anchor, was hangin' around me a little, but I braced up and vowed to myself that I'd do the best I could. If this post-office row did get dangerous, I might telegraph for Jacobs, but I wouldn't till the ship was founderin'.

I suppose you can always get up an opposition

party. There was one amongst the Children of Israel in Moses's time, and there's been plenty ever since. So long as somebody has got somethin' there'll always be somebody else to want to get it away from him. That's human nature, and there's as much human nature in Ostable, size considered, as there was in the Land of Canaan.

I'd been postmaster at Ostable for quite a spell. I didn't try for the position, I was mad when 'twas given to me, there wa'n't much of anything in it but a lot of fuss and trouble, and I'd said forty times over that I wished I didn't have it. But when the gang up at the West End of the town set out to take it away from me I r'ared up on my hind legs and swore I'd fight for my job till the last plank sunk from under me. Don't sound like sense, does it? It wa'n't —'twas just more human nature.

Course the opposition wa'n't large and 'twa'n't very influential. Old man William Phipps and young Ike Hamilton was at the head of it, and they had forty or fifty West-Enders to back 'em up. Phipps had been one of the leading workers for Abubus Payne, the chap I beat for the app'intment in the fust place; and young Hamilton was junior partner in the firm of "Ichabod Hamilton & Co., Stoves, Tinware and Fishermen's Supplies," a mile or so up the main road. Young Ike — everybody called him "Ike," though his real name was Ichabod,

same as his uncle's — was a pushin' critter, who'd come back from a Boston business college and had started right in to make the town sit up and take notice. He was goin' to get rich — he admitted that much — and he cal'lated to show us hayseeds a few things. Up to now he hadn't showed much but loud clothes and cheek, but he had enough of them to keep all hands interested for a spell.

His uncle, Ichabod, Senior, was a shrewd old rooster, with twenty thousand or so that, accordin' to his brags — he was always tellin' of it — he'd put away for a "rainy day." We have consider'ble damp weather at the Cape, but 'twould have taken a Noah's Ark flood to make Ichabod's purse strings loosen up. That twenty thousand dollars had growed fast to his nervous system and when you pulled away a cent he howled. Young Ike was the only one that could mesmerize this old man into spendin' anything, and how he did it nobody knew. But he did. Since he got into that Stoves and Tinware firm the store had been fixed up and advertisements put in the papers, and I don't know what all. The uncle had been under the weather with rheumatism for a year; maybe that explained a little.

Anyhow 'twas young Ike that picked himself to be postmaster instead of me and he and Phipps got the West-Enders, fifty or so of 'em, to sign a petition askin' that a new app'intment be made. I

couldn't be removed except on charges, so a lot of charges was made. Fust, the post-office, bein' in the Ostable Grocery, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes and Fancy Goods Store, was too far from the center of the town. Second, I was neglectin' the office and my assistant — Mary, that is — was really doin' the whole of the government work. There was some truth in this, because Mary knew a good deal more about mail work than I did, and was as capable a woman as ever lived; and besides, Jim Henry and I had been so busy with our store and the "Windmill Restaurant," and our other by-product ventures, that I *had* left Mary to run the post-office. But it was run better than any post-office ever was run afore in Ostable and everybody with brains knew it.

Third . . . But never mind the rest of the charges, they didn't amount to anything. In fact, there was so little to 'em that when the West End petition went in to Washin'ton, I didn't take the trouble to send one of my own, though Jacobs thought I'd better and a hundred folks asked me to and said they'd sign. I just wrote to the Post-office Department and told them that I was ready to submit my case, if there was any need for it, and if they cared to send a representative to investigate, I'd be tickled to death to see him. They wrote back that they'd look into the matter, and that's the way it stood when Jim and Georgianna left and it stayed

so until the lost letter affair run me bows fust onto the rocks and turned the situation from ridiculousness into something that looked likely to be mighty serious for me.

It come about — same as such jolts generally come — when I was least ready for it. Jim Henry had been gone three weeks or more. 'Twas February and none of my influential friends amongst the summer folks was on hand to help. No, Mary and I were all alone and sailin' free with what looked like a fair wind, when "Bump!"— all at once our craft was half full of water and sinkin' fast.

That mornin' the mail was a little mite late and there wa'n't any store trade to speak of. Mary was in the post-office place writin', the usual gang of loafers was settin' around the stove, and I was out front talkin' with Sim Kelley, who lived up to the west end of the town, amongst the mutineers. 'Twas from Sim that I got most of my news about the doin's of the Phipps and Hamilton crowd. He was a great, hulkin', cross-eyed lubber, too lazy to get out of his own way, and as shif'less as a body could be and take pains enough to live.

"Sim," says I to him, "I thought you said old man Hamilton was in bed with his rheumatiz. I saw him up street as I was comin' by. He looked pretty feeble, but he was toddlin' along on foot just as he always does. Rheumatic or not, it's all the

same. I cal'late the old critter wouldn't spend enough money to hire a team if he was dyin'."

Sim was surprised, and not only surprised, but, seemingly, a little mite worried. Why he should be worried because Ichabod was takin' chances with his diseases I couldn't see.

"Old man Hamilton!" says he. "Is he out a cold mornin' like this? Where was he bound?"

"Don't know," says I. "He stopped into the drug store when I saw him. Whether that was his final port of call or not I don't know."

He seemed to be thinkin' it over. Then he got up and walked to the door.

"He ain't in sight nowheres," he says. "Guess he wa'n't comin' as far as here, 'tain't likely."

"Well," says I, "how's the rest of the family? The hopeful leader of the forlorn hope — how's he?"

"Ike?" he says. "Oh, he's all right. He's a mighty smart young feller, Ike is."

"Yes," says I, "so I've heard him say. Gettin' ready to stand in with him when he gets my job, are you, Sim?"

That shook him up a mite. 'Twas common talk around town that Sim and Ike was pretty thick. He turned red under his freckles.

"No, no!" he sputtered. "Course I ain't! I'm standin' by you, Cap'n Snow, and you know it. But,

all the same, Ike's a smart boy. He's gettin' rich fast, Ike is."

"Sold another cookstove, has he?"

"He sells a lot of 'em. Sold two last month. But that ain't it. He's got foresight and friends in the stock exchange up to Boston. He's buyin' copper stocks and they —"

He stopped short; thought his tongue was runnin' away with him, I presume likely. But I was interested and I kept on.

"Oh!" says I; "he's buyin' coppers, is he? Well, where does he get the U. S. coppers to do it with? Is Uncle Ichabod backin' him? Has the old man's rheumatiz struck to his brains?"

"Course he ain't backin' him. *He* don't know nothin' of stocks. He ain't up-to-date same as Ike. But he'll be glad enough when his nephew makes fifty thousand. When he finds that out he'll —"

"He'll never find it out on this earth," I cut in. "If he found out that Ike made fifty dollars, all on his own hook, he'd drop dead with heart disease. If he didn't, everybody else in town would. But it takes money to buy stocks, don't it? I never knew Ike had any cash of his own."

"He's in the firm, ain't he! And Hamilton and Co. are — . . . Hello! here comes the depot wagon."

Sure enough, 'twas the depot wagon with the mail. I took the bags from the driver and went back to help Mary sort. I'd taken to helpin' her a good deal lately — more since Jacobs left than ever afore. She said there wa'n't any need of it, but I didn't agree with her. Of course I realized that I was an old fool — but, somehow or other, I felt more and more contented with life when I was alongside of Mary. She and I understood each other and I'd come to depend upon her same as a man might on his sister — or his — well, or anybody, you understand, that he thought a good deal of and knew was square and — and so on. And she seemed to feel the same way about me.

We sorted the mail together, puttin' it in the different boxes and such. And almost the fust thing I run across was that registered letter addressed to "Ichabod Hamilton, Jr." 'Twas a long envelope and up in one corner of it was printed the name of a Boston broker's firm. I laid it out by itself and went on sortin'.

When the sortin' and distributin' was over and the crowd had gone, I called to Sim Kelley. We didn't have Rural Free Delivery then and Sim carried the West End mail box; that is, a lot of the folks up that way chipped in and paid him so much for deliverin' their mail to 'em.

"Sim," says I, "there's a registered letter here

for young Ike Hamilton. If I give it to you will you be careful and see that he signs the receipt and the like of that?"

He was outside the partition and he come to the little window and took the letter from me. He acted mighty interested.

"Gosh!" says he, grinnin', "I wouldn't wonder if this was . . . Humph! Oh, I'll be careful of it! don't you worry about that."

Just then Mary called to me. I went over to where she was settin' at her desk.

"Cap'n Zeb," she whispered, "I wouldn't send that letter by Sim. It is important, or it would not be registered, and Sim is so irresponsible. If anything *should* happen it would give Mr. Hamilton and the rest such a chance. And they have accused us of bein' careless already."

They had, that was a fact. One or two letters had gone astray durin' the past six months and the loss of 'em was described, with trimmin's, in the West End charges and petition. And Sim *was* a lunkhead. I thought it over a jiffy and then I called to Kelley once more. He was just comin' to the hooks by the door outside the mail-box racks where Mary and I and the store clerk — the one we'd hired in place of 'Dolph — hung our overcoats and hats. Sim had hung his coat there that mornin'.

"Sim," I said, "let me see that registered letter

of Ike Hamilton's again, will you?" He took it out of his pocket and passed it to me.

"All right," says I; "you needn't bother about this. I'll send a notice by you that it's here and Ike can call for it himself. I won't take any chances of your losin' it."

Well, you'd ought to have seen him! His face blazed up like a Fourth of July tar-barrel. "Chances!" he sung out. "What are you talkin' about? I cal'late I'm able to carry a letter without losin' it. I ain't a kid."

"Maybe not," says I, "but you ain't goin' to lose this one, kid or not. Here's the notice, all made out."

"Notice be darned!" he snarled. "You give me that letter. Hamilton and Co. pay me to carry their mail, don't they? And, besides, Ike told me particular that he was expectin'—"

He pulled up short again.

"Well?" says I. "Heave ahead. What's the rest of it?"

"Nothin'," he answered, ugly; "but you've got no right to say I can't carry a letter when I'm paid to do it. As for losin' things, there's others besides me that lose mail in this town."

There's no use arguin' when a matter's all settled. I handed him the notice and walked off, leavin' him standin' outside that partition, sore as a scalded cat.

I looked at my watch. 'Twas twelve o'clock, my dinner time. I walked out to the hook rack, took down my overcoat and put it on. I had the Hamilton letter in my hand. There wa'n't any reason why I should be more worried about that registered letter than any other, but I was, just the same. Maybe 'twas because 'twas Ike's and he was so anxious to make trouble for me. Somehow or other I couldn't feel safe till he got it and signed the receipt. I thought for a minute and then I decided I'd walk up to Hamilton and Co.'s and deliver it myself. That decision was foolish, maybe, but I felt better when 'twas made. I put the letter in the inside pocket of the overcoat I had on, and just as I was doin' it Mary come out of the post-office room with her hat on.

"Oh!" says she, "are you goin' out, Cap'n Zeb? I thought—"

Then I remembered. She'd asked to go to dinner fust that day and I'd told her of course she could. I begged her pardon and said I'd forgot. I'd wait till she got back. So, after makin' sure that I didn't care, she took her coat from the hook, put it on and went out.

I took off my overcoat and, just as I did so, somethin' fell on the floor. I stooped and picked it up. I swan to man if it wasn't that pesky Hamilton letter! Thinks I, "That's funny!" I put my hand

into the pocket where it had been and there was a hole right through the linin'. Now if there's one thing I'm fussy about it is that my pockets are whole. And I *knew* this one ought to be whole. So I looked at the coat and I'm blessed if it was mine at all! 'Twas Sim Kelley's! Both coats had been hangin' together on the hook-rack and both was blue and about the same size. I'd been saved by a miracle, as you might say.

I was comin' to feel more and more as if there was some sort of fate about that registered letter. I took it back into the post-office room, handlin' it as careful as if 'twas solid gold, and laid it down on the sortin' bench behind the letter boxes. And then somebody spoke to me through the little window.

"Cap'n Zeb," says Sim Kelley, "there's a man just drove over from Bayport to see you. Come in Gabe Lumley's buggy, he did. His name's Peters and Gabe says he's got some sort of government job."

"Government job?" says I. And then it flashed through my mind who the feller might be. The Post-office Department had said they might send an investigator. I didn't care for that, but I did wish Sim hadn't seen him.

"Oh," says I; "all right. It's the lighthouse inspector, I shouldn't wonder. Guess 'tain't me he is after. Probably I ain't the Snow he wants to

see; it's Henry Snow over to the Point. Where is he?"

"Out on the platform," says Sim. I hurried out of the post-office room, lockin' the door careful astern of me. The man Peters was just comin' into the store. I met him at the front door. We shook hands and he introduced himself. 'Twas the investigator, sure enough.

"Glad to see you," says I. "I know that may sound like a lie, but, as it happens, it ain't in this case. I ain't got anything to be ashamed of and the sooner the government finds that out the better I'll be pleased."

He laughed. He was a real good chap, this Peters man, and I took to him right off the reel. We stood there talkin' and laughin' and says he:

"Well, Cap'n," he says, "I'll tell you frankly that I'm not very much worried about the conduct of your office here at Ostable. I've made some inquiries about you, here and in Washin'ton, and the answers are pretty satisfactory. Congressman Shelton seems to be a friend of yours."

I grinned. "Yes," says I, "but Shelton's prejudiced, I'm afraid. He and old Major Clark ate a chowder once that I cooked and ever since they've both swore by me."

He laughed, though I could see Shelton hadn't told him the yarn.

"Humph!" says he, "that's unusual, isn't it? Judgin' by some chowders *I've* eaten, it would be easier to swear *at* the cook. Speakin' of eatables, though, reminds me that I'm hungry. Where's a good place to get a meal around here?"

"Nowhere," says I, prompt; "not at this season of the year, with the summer dinin'-room closed. But, if you'll wait until my assistant gets back, I'll pilot you down to the Poquit House, where I feed, and we'll face the wust together."

He was willin' to risk it, he said, and we walked back and set down in the post-office department. As we left the front door Sim Kelley went out of it, luggin' his West-End mail box. Peters and I talked. Seems he hadn't come to the Cape a-purpose to investigate me, but he had a job at the Bayport office and had took me in on the way home. After a spell Mary come back and Peters and I headed for the Poquit, where the cold fish balls and warmed-over beans was waitin'.

On the way I saw old man Hamilton, Ike's uncle, totterin' along, headin' to the west'ard this time. I pointed him out to Peters.

"There goes," I says, "one of the fellers that's trying to knock me out of my job."

"Humph!" says he; "he looks pretty near knocked out himself. Why, he's all bent out of shape."

"Yes," I told him. "Ichabod's bent, but he's far from broke. And a tough old limb like him stands a lot of bendin'."

I was feelin' pretty good. With a square man like this Peters to look into matters, I cal'lated I'd be postmaster for a spell yet.

But that afternoon, about three o'clock, as we was inside the mail room, Mary at her desk, and Peters alongside of her, goin' over the books and papers, and me smokin' in a chair nigh the delivery window, Ike Hamilton walked into the store.

"Afternoon, Snow," says he, pert and important as ever, "I understand there's a registered letter for me. I s'pose it is part of your business to refuse to give it to the regular carrier and put me to the trouble of walkin' way down here."

"I s'pose 'tis," says I.

"Yes," he says. "Well, if you were as careful to put your partic'lar friends to the same inconvenience there might not be as much talk about you and your handlin' of this office as there is now."

"Oh, yes, there would," I told him. "There'd always be more talk than anything else where you lived, Ike. Want your letter, do you?"

He was mad, but he held in pretty well.

"I do — if gettin' it won't make you work *too* hard," he says, sarcastic. "I should hate to see you really work."

"Yes," I says, "the sight of work never was a joy to you, 'cordin' to all accounts. Well, here's your letter."

I reached down to the sortin' table where I'd laid the letter at noon time — and it wa'n't there.

I hunted that table over. "Mary," says I, "did you put that registered letter of Mr. Hamilton's away somewheres?"

She looked surprised and, it seemed to me, rather anxious.

"Why no!" says she; "I haven't touched it."

Whew! . . . Well, there was a lively hunt in that mail room for the next ten minutes, but it ended in nothin'.

Ike Hamilton's registered letter was *gone!*

CHAPTER XV

HOW IKE'S LOSS TURNED OUT TO BE MY GAIN

THERE'S no use dwelling on unpleasantness. And there's no use tellin' what Ike Hamilton said. I'd be liable to the law, if I did tell it, and, besides, I've been away from seafarin' so long that my memory for such language ain't as good as 'twas. Ike wa'n't only mad now: he was ha'f crazy, and pale and scared-lookin' besides. The interview ended by my takin' him by the arm and leadin' him to the door.

"You get out of here," I told him, "and I'll leave this door open so's to sweeten the air after you. That letter of yours has turned up missin' and I'm mighty sorry. I'll find it, though, or die a-tryin'. Meanwhile, unless you can behave like a decent human bein'— which I doubt — you'll find it turrible unhealthy for you on these premises. Understand?"

I cal'late he understood, for he waited till he was out of reach afore he answered. Then he turned and snarled at me like a kicked dog.

"By the Almighty, Zeb Snow," he says, "this is

the wust day's work *you* ever did! That letter's wuth hundreds of dollars to me and I'll sue you for every cent. And, more'n that," he says, "this is the last straw that'll break your back as postmaster of this town. *You're* done! and don't you forget it!"

I wa'n't likely to forget it — not to any consider'ble extent.

Well, all the rest of that day and for the next two days, Mary and Peters and I hunted high and low for that letter; but we couldn't find it. I was worried, Peters was worried, and Mary Blaisdell seemed the most worried of any of us. Ike Hamilton come in every few hours, and, though he blustered and threatened a whole lot, he kept a civil tongue in his head, rememberin', I cal'late, what I said to him when I showed him the door. Apparently he hadn't told any of his cronies about his loss, for nobody else said a word about it to me. This was queer, for I expected the news would be all over town by this time.

Peters asked a lot of questions and I done my best to satisfy him. I showed him the exact place where I laid the letter down afore I went to the front of the store to meet him, and he remembered, same as I did, that the door to the mail room was locked when we come back to it. And we'd stayed in that room together until Mary came and we went to dinner. Nobody but Mary and I had keys to the room, either.

Course I thought of Sim Kelley and how mad he was because I took the letter away from him, and Peters and I cross-questioned him pretty sharp. But he told a straight yarn and stuck to it. He hadn't seen the letter since I took it. He'd delivered the notice to Ike and Ike had said he'd call and get the letter that afternoon. Well, all that seemed to be true, and, besides, there was no way Sim could have got hold of the thing if he'd wanted to.

"No use," says I, when the questionin' was over and Sim had cleared out, protestin' injured innocence and almost cryin'. "No use," says I, "I cal'late he's tellin' the truth for once in his life. I guess his skirts are clear."

"Maybe so," says Peters. "His story is straight enough; but he don't look you in the face; I don't like that."

"That's nothin'," I said. "He'd have to get 'round the corner to look a body in the face, as cross-eyed as he is."

Mary Blaisdell spoke up then. "If this letter shouldn't be found at all, Mr. Peters," says she, "what effect would it have on Cap'n Zeb's position as postmaster?"

Peters was pretty solemn, and he shook his head.

"Well," he says, "to be perfectly frank with you, Cap'n, it might have consider'ble effect. From

what I've seen of you and this office, generally speakin', my report to headquarters would be a very favorable one. Your records and accounts are straight and the place is neat and well kept. But your opponent's petition charges that several letters have been lost already. This loss comes at a very bad time and it *might* be considered serious."

I'd realized all this, but it didn't help me much to hear him say it. I didn't make any answer, but Mary asked another question.

"But if," she says, slow, "it should turn out that the Cap'n was not to blame at all? If someone else had lost that letter? He wouldn't be removed *then?*"

"No, certainly not. That is, not if my report counted for anything."

"I see," says she; and she didn't speak to us again that afternoon. Peters, though, had more questions to ask. What sort of a letter was this, anyhow? And did I have any idea what was in it?

I told him that I didn't really know much, but, bein' a Yankee, I was subject to the guessin' habit. Ike Hamilton had been buyin' stocks up to Boston and this letter had a broker firm's name printed on the envelope. My guess was that there was some certificates, or such, inside.

"I see," he says. "That would explain what he said about its value. So he's been speculatin', hey?"

"So Sim Kelley hinted. But where the money comes from I don't see. Old Ichabod don't furnish it, I'll bet a dollar. The old critter's got cramps in the pocketbook worse than he has in his back."

"That was the old feller you pointed out to me the other day," he says. "I haven't seen him since. Where is he?"

"Back in bed with the rheumatiz, so I hear. Guess his cruise down town was too much for him."

Well, the rest of our talk didn't amount to much and I went home that night pretty blue and discouraged. I didn't care so much about bein' postmaster, but it hurt my pride to be bounced for bad seamanship. I'd never wrecked a craft afore in my life.

Next mornin' I come to the store at my usual time, but Mary was late, for a wonder. When she did come she looked so pale and used up that I was troubled.

"Mary," says I, "what's the matter? Ain't sick, are you?"

"Oh, no!" says she. "I — I didn't sleep well, that's all. I'm all right."

"But, Mary," I says, "I —"

"Please excuse me, Cap'n Zeb," she cut in. "I'm very busy."

She'd never used that tone to me afore, and I was set back about forty mile. Why she should be so

frosty I couldn't see. I went out to the platform and paced the quarter deck, thinkin'. I was down at the heel anyway, and I thought a whole lot of fool things. I was goin' to lose my job and so I s'posed that, after all, I'd ought to expect my friends to shake me. There's a proverb about rats leavin' a leaky vessel. But Mary Blaisdell!! I cal'late I come as nigh wishin' I was dead as ever I did in my life.

'Twas almost eleven afore the Peters man showed up. He was walkin' brisk and smilin' a little.

"Well," says I, "you're lookin' a heap more chipper than I feel. What are you grinnin' about?"

"Oh, just for instance," he says. "Is Miss Blaisdell in the office?"

"Guess so. She was awhile ago. Yes, she's there. Why?"

"I want to see her — and you, too. Come on."

He led the way to the mail room. Mary was there, workin' at her books. She looked up when we come in, and her face was whiter than ever. I forgot all about my "rat" thoughts and the rest of it.

"Mary," says I, anxious, "you *are* under the weather. Why don't you go home?"

She held up her hand and stopped me.

"Please don't," she says.

Then, turnin' to Peters: "Mr. Peters, I want

to speak to you. And to you, too, Cap'n Zeb. I — I've got somethin' that I must tell you."

'Twa'n't so much what she said as the way she said it. I looked at Peters and he looked at me. I cal'late we was both wonderin' what sort of lightnin' was goin' to strike now.

She didn't leave us to wonder long. She went right on, speakin' quick, as if she wanted to get it over with.

"Mr. Peters," she says, "last night you told me that, if it should be proved that Cap'n Zeb had no part in losin' that letter, if it wasn't his fault at all, the postmastership wouldn't be taken from him. You meant that, didn't you?"

Peters looked queer enough. "Why, yes," he says, "I did. But how —"

"Mr. Peters," she went on, in the same hurried way, "*I* lost that letter."

I don't know what Peters did then, but I know that my knees give from under me and I flopped down in the armchair.

"You? *You,* Mary!" says I.

Peters seemed to be as much flabbergasted as I was. He rubbed his forehead.

"*You* lost it?" he says, slow.

"Yes," says she. "That is, I — I destroyed it by accident. It was while you two were at dinner. I was clearin' up the sortin' table and — and puttin'

the waste paper in the stove. I — I must have taken the letter with the other things."

"Nonsense!" I sung out. Peters didn't say nothin'.

"Nonsense!" I said again. "You don't know that 'twas —"

"But I do," she interrupted. "I — I saw it burnin' and — and it was too late to get it out. It was my fault altogether. No one else is to blame at all."

If I hadn't been settin' down already you could have knocked me over with a feather. 'Twas an accident, of course; anybody might have done such a thing; but what I couldn't understand was why she hadn't told me of it afore. That didn't seem like her at all.

"Well!" I says; "*well!*"

Peters had transferred his rubbin' from his forehead to his chin.

"Miss Blaisdell," says he, quiet, "why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"That's all right," I cut in, quick. "I don't blame her for not tellin'. I cal'late that she felt so bad about it that she couldn't make up her mind to tell right off. That was it, wa'n't it, Mary?"

She didn't look up, but sat playin' with a penholder.

"Yes," she says, "that was it."

"All right then," says I. "It was an accident, and if anybody's to blame it's me. I shouldn't have left the letter there."

Then she looked up. "Of course you're not to blame," she says, awful earnest. "It was my fault entirely. You know it was, Mr. Peters. It was my fault and I must take the consequences. I will resign my place as assistant and —"

"Resign!" I sung out. "Resign! Well, I guess not!"

"But I shall. Of course I shall. Mr. Peters, you see that it wasn't Cap'n Snow's fault, don't you? *Don't* you?"

"Yes," says Peters, short.

"Nonsense!" I roared. "He don't see no such thing. Mary, I don't care —"

She held up her hand. "Please don't talk to me now," she begged. "Please — not now."

I looked at Peters. There was a look in his eyes, almost as if he was smilin' inside. I could have punched his head for it.

"But, Mary —" I begun.

"Please don't talk to me," she begged, almost cryin'. "Please go away and leave me now. Please."

I cal'late I shouldn't have gone; fact is, I know I shouldn't; but that government investigator put his hand on my arm.

"Cap'n," he says, "come with me."

"With you?" I snapped. "Why?"

"Because I want you to. It's important. I won't keep you long."

I went, but he'll never know how much I wanted to kick him. As I shut the door of the mail room I saw poor Mary's head go down on her arms on the desk.

Peters led me out to the front of the store, where he come to anchor on a shoe-case.

"Set down," says he, pattin' the case alongside of him.

"I don't feel like settin'," I says, ugly. "And I tell you, Mr. Peters —"

"No," says he, "I'm goin' to tell *you* this time. Or, if I'm not, the feller I told to be here at half past eleven will. Yes . . . here he comes now."

In at the door comes Sim Kelley, and, if ever a chap looked as if he was marchin' to be hung, he did. His eyes was red and his face was white under the freckles.

"Here — here I be, Mr. Peters," he stammered.

"Yes, I see you 'be,'" says Peters, dry as a chip. "All right. Now you can tell Cap'n Snow what you told me this mornin'."

Sim looked at me, and at the government man. He was shakin' all over.

"Aw, Cap'n Zeb," he bust out, "don't be too

hard on me. Don't put me in jail! I know I hadn't ought to have taken that letter, but you riled me up when you told me I couldn't be trusted with it. Ike pays me to fetch the mail. And he told me he was expectin' an important letter from them stock-brokers. So I —"

Well, there's no use tryin' to spin the yarn the way he did. 'Twas all mixed up with prayers about not puttin' him in jail, and what would his ma say, and "pleases" and "oh, dont's" and such. B'iled down and skimmed it amounted to this: He'd seen me lay that Hamilton letter on the sortin' table, saw it when he come back to tell me that Peters had arrived. After I'd gone out to the platform he was struck with an idea. He *would* take that letter to Ike, just to show that he could be trusted, and, besides Ike had promised him fifty cents for lookin' out for it and fetchin' it to him direct. He had a key to the Hamilton box and the letter laid right back of that box. All he had to do was to reach through the box to the table, take the letter, and lock up again. So he did it, and put the letter in his overcoat inside pocket.

"And — and —" he finished up, almost blubberin', "there was a great big hole in that pocket and I didn't know it."

"I did," says I, involuntary, so to speak. "Never mind. Heave ahead."

"And the letter must have dropped out of it. When I got a little ways up the road I found 'twas gone. I didn't dast tell Ike or you. I — I didn't *dast* to. Ike would kill me if I told him, and — and — Oh, please, Cap'n Zeb, don't put me in jail! I don't know where the letter is. Honest, I don't! *Please* . . ." and so on.

Peters cut him short. "There!" says he, "that'll do. Kelley, you go out on the platform and wait till we need you. Go ahead! Shut up — and go."

Sim went, but I cal'late if we'd listened we could have heard the platform boards tremblin' underneath where he was standin'."

Peters looked at me and grinned. 'Twas my time to rub my forehead.

"Well!" says I. "Well, I — I . . . Is he lyin'?"

"Didn't act like it, did he?"

"No-o, he didn't. But — but, if he took that letter, how did it get back onto that sortin' table?"

"How do you know it did?"

"How do I know! Course it got back there! Didn't Mary say —"

"Wait a minute," he put in. "How do you explain that, Cap'n?"

He was holdin' out somethin' that he'd took from his pocket. I grabbed it. 'Twas the regular re-

ceipt for that registered letter, and 'twas signed by Ichabod Hamilton, Junior.

I looked at that receipt and then at him. The paddin' in my head that, up to then, I'd complimented by callin' brains was whirlin' as if somebody was stirrin' it. I couldn't say a word. He laughed out loud.

"Don't have a fit, Cap'n Snow," he says. "It's simple enough. What you told me yesterday about the firm of Hamilton and Co. put me wise to the real answer to the riddle. I remembered that you pointed out Hamilton to me on the street when you and I were on the way to that hotel where we dined the noon of my arrival. He was on his way home then and he had been somewhere in this vicinity. There was a chance that he had been here at the office. This mornin' I went to his house and found him in bed. He was full of rheumatism and groans, but fuller still of the Evil One. I told him I knew he'd got his partner's registered letter — a bluff of course — and he didn't take the trouble to deny it. Seems Sim Kelley, with the mail box, passed him right here by the store platform. As they passed each other the letter fell from Kelley's overcoat pocket. The old man picked it up, intendin' to call to Kelley and give it back to him. When he saw the address he didn't."

He stopped then, waitin' for me to say somethin',

I s'pose. But I couldn't say anything. My head was fuller of stir-about than ever, and I just stared at him with my mouth open.

"When he saw the address — and the name of the brokerage firm — he didn't. He took that letter home and opened it. You see, the old feller is nobody's fool, even if his rheumatism has kept him from active business for the last few months. He had suspected his nephew of speculatin' and here was the proof, a hundred shares of cheap minin' stock, and a letter sayin' that two hundred more had been bought on a margin. Young Hamilton had been stockjobbin' with the firm's money."

"My — soul!" was all I could say.

"Yes; well, old Ichabod is — ha! ha! — a queer character. His rheumatism had come back and he was waitin' to get better afore he took the matter up with his partner. 'What I'll say and do to that young pup is a well man's job,' he told me. We had a long talk and it ended in his sendin' for Ike. As soon as the young chap came I cleared out — that is, after I got this receipt signed. That bedroom was too sulphurous for me. I could smell brimstone even in the front yard. Cap'n, I guess you needn't worry about your rival candidate for postmaster. He's got troubles enough of his own."

I got up, slow and deliberate, from that shoe-case.

"But — but —" I stuttered.

"Yes? Anything that I haven't made clear?"

"Anything? Why! if all this yarn of yours is so— . . . But it *can't* be so! Why did Mary burn that letter?"

"She didn't."

"But she said she did."

"I know. Well, Cap'n, if you'll remember when we talked, the three of us, yesterday, I hinted that unless you were cleared of blame in this affair you might be removed from office."

"I know, but . . . Hey? You mean that she lied and put the blame on herself, so as to save *me?* So's I'd keep my job?"

"Looks that way to a man up a tree, doesn't it?"

"But why? Why should she sacrifice herself for — for me?"

Peters bit the end off of a cigar. "That," says he, "don't come under the head of government business."

Mary was still at her desk when I walked into the mail room. I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Mary," says I, "I know all about it."

She looked at me. Her eyes were wet, and I cal'late mine wa'n't as dry as a sand bank in July.

"You know?" she says.

"Yes," says I. And I told her the yarn. Afore I got through the color had come back to her cheeks.

"Then you did leave it on the sortin' table after all," she says, almost in a whisper.

"Course I did! Didn't I say so?"

"Yes; but Cap'n Zeb, I saw you put that letter in your overcoat pocket. I saw you do it, myself."

So there 'twas. I'd forgot to tell her about my mistake in the overcoats and she thought I'd lost the letter and didn't know it.

"And so," says I, after I'd explained, "you thought I'd lost it and yet you took the blame all on yourself. You risked your place and told a lie just to save me, Mary. Why did you do it?"

"How could I help it?" she says. "You've been so good to me and so kind."

"Good and kind be keelhauled!" I sung out. "Mary, my goodness and kindness wouldn't explain a thing like that. Oh, Mary, don't let's have another misunderstandin'. I'm crazy maybe to think of such a thing, and I'm ten years older than you, and you'll be throwin' yourself away, but, *do* you care enough for me to —"

She got up from her desk, all flustered like.

"It's mail time," she says. "I — I must —"

But 'twa'n't mail I was interested in just then. I caught her afore she could get away.

"Could you, Mary?" I pleaded. She wouldn't look at me, so I put my hand under her chin and tipped her head back so I could see her face. 'Twas

as red as a spring peony, and her eyes were wetter than ever. But they were shinin' behind the fog.

Well, about three that afternoon, we were alone together in the mail room. Peters, who had as much common sense as anybody ever I see, had gone for a walk.

Mary was thinkin' things over and says she, "But it was too bad," she says, "that all the worry and trouble had to come on you just because of that foolish Sim Kelley. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry!" says I. "I'm goin' to give Sim a ten-dollar bill next time I see him. If I gave him a million 'twould be a cheap price for what I've got by his buttin' in. Sorry! *I* ain't sorry, I tell you that!"

And I've never been sorry since, either.

CHAPTER XVI

I PAY MY OTHER BET

'TWAS June, and Mary and I were in New York together, on *our* honeymoon. We'd been married, quietly, by the same parson that tied the knot for Jim and Georgianna, and Georgianna and Jim had been on hand at the ceremony. We was cal'latin' to stop in New York a few days, then go to Washin'ton, and from there to Chicago, and from there to California or the Yellerstone, or anywhere that seemed good to us at the time. I'd waited fifty years for my weddin' tour and I didn't intend to let dollars and cents cut much figger, so far as regulatin' the limits of the cruise was concerned. Jim Henry and the clerk, who'd been swore in as substitute assistant, believed they could run the store and post-office while we were gone.

Mary and I were walkin' down Broadway together. I'd told her I had an errand to do and asked her if she wanted to come along. She said she did and we were walkin' down Broadway, as I said, when all at once I pulled up short.

"What is it?" asked Mary, lookin' to see what had run across my bows to bring me up into the wind so sudden.

"Nothin' serious," says I; "but, unless my eyesight is goin' back on me, this shop we're in front of is what I've been huntin' for."

She looked at the shop I was p'intin' at. The window was full of hats, straw ones mainly.

"Why!" says she, "it's a hat store, isn't it? You don't need a new hat, Zebulon, do you?"

"You bet I do!" says I, chucklin'. "I need just as much hat as there is. Come in and watch me buy it."

I could see she was puzzled, but she was more so after I got into the store. A slick-lookin', but pretty condescendin' young clerk marched up to us and says he:

"Somethin' in a hat, sir?"

"Yes, sir," says I; "*every*thing in a hat."

He didn't know what to make of that, so he tried again.

"One of our new straws, perhaps?" he asks. "The fifteenth is almost here, you know."

"Maybe so," I told him, "but I don't want any straw, the fifteenth or the sixteenth either. I want a plug hat, a beaver hat — that's what I want."

The clerk was a little set back, I guess, but poor Mary was all at sea.

"Why, Zebulon!" she whispers, grabbin' me by the arm, "what are you doin'? You're not goin' to buy a silk hat!"

"Yes, I am," says I.

"But you aren't goin' to *wear* it."

To save me, when I looked at her face I couldn't help laughin'.

"Ain't I?" says I. "Why, I think I'd look too cute for anything in a tall hat. What's your opinion?" turnin' to the clerk.

He coughed behind his hand and then made proclamation that a silk hat would become me very well, he was sure.

"Then you're a whole lot surer than I am," says I. "However, trot one out, the best article you've got in stock."

That clerk's back was gettin' limberer every second. "Yes, sir," says he, bowin'. "Our imported hat at ten dollars is the finest in New York. If you and the lady will step this way, please."

We stepped; that is, I did. I pretty nigh had to *drag* Mary.

"What size, sir?" asked the clerk.

"Oh, I don't know," says I. "Any nice genteel size will do, I guess."

I had consider'ble fun with that clerk, fust and last, and when we came out of that store I was luggin' a fine leather box with the imported tall hat

inside it. I'd made arrangements that, if the size shouldn't be right, it could be exchanged.

"And now, Mary," says I, "I cal'late you're wonderin' where we'll go next, ain't you?"

She looked at me and shook her head.

"Zeb," she says, half laughin', "I — I'm almost afraid we ought to go to the insane asylum."

I laughed out loud then. "Not just yet," I told her. "We're goin' on a cruise down South Street fust."

So I hired a hack — street cars ain't good enough for a man on his weddin' trip — and the feller drove us to the number I give him on South Street. The old place looked mighty familiar.

"Is Mr. Pike in?" I asked the bookkeeper, who had hollered my name out as if he was glad to see me.

"Why, yes, Cap'n Snow, he's in. I'll tell him you're here."

"Wait a minute," says I. "Is he alone? Good! Then I'll tell him myself. Come, Mary."

Pike was in his private office, not lookin' a day older than when I left him four years and a half ago. He looked up, jumped, and then grabbed me by both hands. "Why, Cap'n Zeb!" he sung out. "If this isn't good for sore eyes. How are you? What are you doin' here in New York? By George, I'm glad to see you! What —"

"Wait!" I interrupted. "Business fust, and pleasure afterwards. I'm here to pay my debts."

"Debts?" says he, wonderin'.

"Yes," I says. "Did you get a hat from me four year or so ago?"

He laughed. "Yes, I did," he says. "I wrote you that I did. I knew I should win that bet. You couldn't stay idle to save your soul."

"There was another bet, too, if you recollect. A bet with a five-year limit on it. The limit won't be up till next fall, so here I am — and here's the other hat."

I set the leather box on the table. He stared at it and then at me.

"What do you mean?" he says, slow. "I don't remember. . . . Why, yes — I do! You don't mean to tell me that you're —"

"That's the hat, ain't it?" I cut in. "You're a man of judgment, Mr. Pike, and any time you want to set up professionally as a prophet I'd like to take stock in the company."

He was beginnin' to smile.

"Then —" says he — "Why, then this must be —"

I cut in and stopped him.

"Hold on," says I. "Hold on! I'm prouder to be able to say it than I ever was of anything else in this world, and I sha'n't let you say it fust. Mr.

Pike, let me introduce you to my wife — Mrs. Zebulon Snow."

About half an hour afterwards he found time to look at the hat.

"Whew!" says he. "Cap'n, this is much too good a hat for you to buy for me. I'm mighty glad, for your sake, that I won the bet, but —"

"Ssh-h! shh!" says I. "Don't say another word. Think of what *I* won! Hey, Mary?"

THE END

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